ISSUE 404
EMPIRE AUGUST 2022

AVATAR: THE WAY OF WATER • THOR: LOVE AND THUNDER • THE SANDMAN • ANDOR • MICHAEL MANN

"My avatar gets the egg because I'm the only one here with the balls to run this place."

BACK TO THE VIDEO STORE WITH QUENTIN TARANTINO

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KATE WINSLET
IS
RONAL

NOPE
JORDAN PEELE ON THE SECRETS OF HIS UFO HORROR

PREY
THE PREDATOR PREQUEL YOU DIDN'T SEE COMING

HEAT 2
MICHAEL MANN TALKS HIS CRIME-SAGA SEQUEL

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AVATAR

THE WAY OF WATER

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THIS MONTH

WELL, THIS IS a big one. In fact, they don't get any bigger.

In 2009, James Cameron returned from a 12-year hiatus, dropping his latest artistic venture into cinemas worldwide. It was called *Avatar*, and it made an impact, to put it mildly. People went back, and back, and back. Then went back one more time, just for luck. The sci-fi epic grossed $2.8 billion (still more than any film in history), gave some viewers actual withdrawal symptoms (viperwolves are addictive; don't look at more than three a day), and brought us — in my opinion — one of the greatest movie villains of all time, in the shape of Stephen Lang's Colonel Miles Quaritch, a man so tough he probably chews gravel, then shoots it.

Now, James Cameron is back again, and if you thought he made a splash last time, best get your swimgear on stat. Because his blue planet is about to get a whole lot bluer, with *Avatar: The Way Of Water* taking our Na'vi heroes deep into the waters of Pandora on a scale we've never seen before. And this issue of *Empire* is the very first place you can read all about it, from Ian Freer's zesty chat with Cameron, to interviews with Kate Winslet, Sigourney Weaver, and, yes, Stephen Lang. That's right: Quaritch was dead... but he got better.

From our covers revealing Ronal (Winslet) and Kiri (Weaver) to a sprawl of first-look images, it's a visual feast. And elsewhere in the issue we keep the cerulean theme going. There's our exclusive photoshoot and interview with Michael Mann, who explains why he's bringing his *Heat* characters back to life. And I got to hear Quentin Tarantino talking a blue streak as he and Roger Avary revisited their pre-fame video-store days. Warning: contains explicit references to Peppa Pig.

Enjoy the issue.

NICK DE SEMLYEN
EDITOR
@nickdesemlyen

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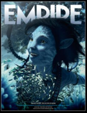

This month's exclusive subscriber cover, a look at *Avatar: The Way Of Water*'s Kiri (Sigourney Weaver)

TURN TO PAGE 8 FOR DETAILS ON HOW TO SUBSCRIBE

Marco Vittur

EMPIRE

WHAT WE'VE BEEN UP TO THIS MONTH

SPENDING QUALITY TIME WITH *STAR WARS* ROYALTY

The Force will be with Ben Travis... always. Our Deputy Online Editor went over to Anaheim, California, for this year's Star Wars Celebration, and had a simply wonderful time. Here he is with *Star Wars* supremo Kathleen Kennedy.

HANGING OUT IN LOS ANGELES WITH MICHAEL MANN

This month we speak to the great Michael Mann about his return to the world of *Heat*, so we decided to take him out on the mean streets of Los Angeles and shoot him. Not like that. Here, Mann is captured by photographer Art Streiber.

GETTING SERIOUSLY ANIMATED WITH HENRY SELICK

Henry Selick, stopped in motion, which is apt. The animation legend behind *The Nightmare Before Christmas* was talking to *Empire*'s Kambole Campbell about his new Netflix film, *Wendell & Wild*. Find out more about that on page 24.

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20 RAY LIOTTA Joe Carnahan writes movingly about his friend, and the star of *Narc* and *Smokin' Aces*, the late, great Ray Liotta.

28 PREY You just can't keep a good alien killing machine down, as the *Predator* prequel shows.

33 PINT OF MILK What does John Cho like to drink when Harold gets the munchies?

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62 NOPE When Jordan Peele said he wanted to talk to *Empire* about his mysterious new movie, there was only one word we could say in response. (That word was "yep", in case it wasn't obvious.)

68 THOR: LOVE AND THUNDER Ever had an ex suddenly show up out of nowhere? Taika Waititi, Chris Hemsworth and Natalie Portman tell us how the new MCU movie explores that universal scenario, and adds magical hammers and space goats.

74 MICHAEL MANN As the great director prepares for the release of *Heat 2*, his first novel, he tells us why he's returning to this world nearly 30 years after the original movie. This is the kind of Mannsplaining we can get behind.

82 THE SANDMAN Neil Gaiman's graphic novel was unfilmable, they said. But they never said it was unNetflixable.

88 TARANTINO AND AVARY Old pals, Oscar-winning colleagues, and now podcasters, Quentin Tarantino and Roger Avary share their learnings from seeing basically every film ever made.

94 GODS AMONG US: JOHN TRAVOLTA Inside the comeback-strewn career of the one and only, wickedly talented Adele Dazeem.

Above: Blue movie — Lo'ak and Kiri in *Avatar: The Way Of Water*. **Below:** Yes, that was a gun in Divine's pocket, and no, she's not pleased to see you.

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34 LIGHTYEAR Is Pixar's latest a bit of a Buzz-kill?

39 THE RAILWAY CHILDREN RETURN Due to leaves on the line, this review has now been delayed by ten minutes.

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102 GET CARTER "Hodges! That's his name!"

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116 ADRIEN BRODY Role-by-role with King Kong's good friend.

Photofest. Spine lines issue 403: Newsstand: Elves: "Why does Elrond mean 'secret meeting'?" is from *The Martian*. Dwarves: "Blistering treasure!" is from *The Adventures Of Tintin*. Harfoots: "Hello, little Hobbit. Spark my ganja" is from *This Is The End*. Subs: "Dude, I just spent the afternoon in Middle-earth with Glee-Glop and the Floopty-Doos" is from *Role Models*.

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TALK TO US

COMMENT OF THE MONTH

GOOD COP LAND, GREAT COP LAND

Just reading the latest issue (403) and I'm compelled to thank you for your article on one of the 1990s' best, yet underappreciated, movies — *Cop Land*. Especially poignant in light of Ray Liotta's recent passing, this film should have been a huge hit and had awards thrown at it. I especially like to quote it when detractors say that Stallone is not a good actor. He might have picked easy and lazy options for films he's made, but for him to comfortably hold his own against De Niro, Keitel and Liotta shows what he's capable of when he *tries*.

DAVID THOMSON, VIA EMAIL

Are you saying he wasn't trying when he made Stop! Or My Mom Will Shoot? *Hey, now. Yes — we love* Cop Land, *and yes, Stallone is all sorts of incredible in it. Thanks, David — enjoy a Picturehouse membership on us.*

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MAMMA MIA...

Ian Freer's review of *Bergman Island* is fine, apart from one unforgivable, ABBA-related error. Mia Wasikowska doesn't cut loose to 'Dancing Queen', but 'The Winner Takes It All'. These things are important!

ROB DRISCOLL, VIA EMAIL

We agree! As such, we have sentenced Ian to listen to ABBA for 24 hours straight.

ON OUR *RINGS OF POWER* SUBSCRIBER COVER:

[CONCEPT ARTIST] JOHN HOWE GAVE THAT ICE TROLL ROCK-HARD NIPPLES

@REALNICKELASS

ON RYAN GOSLING'S KEN IN *BARBIE*:

HE LOOKS LIKE HE SNEEZES GLITTER

MARK MATASH

RESCUE RANGERS RAVING

The new Chip 'n Dale movie surely has to be one of the biggest surprises in recent memory? I expected a bland, unadventurous sequel. What I got was a razor-sharp satire with jokes that wouldn't be out of place in peak *The Simpsons*. I do think the low-key Disney+ release will mean little recognition early on. But once word spreads, I think this is a movie that will get lots of love. Arguably the best live-action/animation hybrid since *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*.

MATT TUCK, VIA EMAIL

Absolutely — finally a squeakquel we can all get behind. And any favourable Roger Rabbit *comparison is high praise indeed.*

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No./1

Hang on tight for *Star Wars*' grittiest adventure yet

Telling a five-year story across 24 episodes, **ANDOR** will delve into the franchise's legacy like never before

SPOILER ALERT: THEY all die at the end. For a film whose final word spoken is "hope", *Rogue One* might be *Star Wars*' darkest adventure — one in which all of its heroes, including Felicity Jones' Jyn Erso and Diego Luna's Cassian Andor, give their lives to smuggle the Death Star plans to the Rebels. Now, the film positioned as an immediate predecessor to *A New Hope* is begetting its own immediate predecessor — Disney+ series *Andor*, telling the story of Luna's conflicted warrior set amid the rising tide of the Empire, as galactic citizens begin fighting back, which creator Tony Gilroy said, at Star Wars Celebration, will "walk you into *Rogue [One]*." The story of rebellion is far from over.

If Cassian Andor's character isn't fully fleshed out yet, *Andor* should change that. "*Rogue One* is more about an event than the actual journey of [the] characters," Luna tells *Empire*. "It's quite amazing to start a show where it's not about where we can end — it's about, how did we end there?"

That "how" will come in the form of *Star Wars*' most expansive streaming series yet. The first season consists of 12 episodes, 50 per cent longer than either season of *The Mandalorian*, spanning the first year of a five-year story. The

Left: Rebel leader Luthen Rael (Stellan Skarsgård) and Cassian Andor (Diego Luna). **Below:** Rael and Mon Mothma (Genevieve O'Reilly) in contemplative mood.

recently confirmed second season will cover the other four years across 12 more episodes. "The scale of the show is so huge," says Gilroy. "Directors work in blocks of three episodes, so we did four blocks [in Season 1] of three episodes each. We looked and said, 'Wow, it'd be really interesting if we come back, and we use each block to represent a year. We'll move a year closer with each block.'"

Those longer season orders are indicative of the show's considerable scope — venturing across the galaxy on both sides of the divide. "It is an intense, epic story with a huge ensemble cast and many, many characters you're meeting along Cassian Andor's way," promises producer Sanne Wohlenberg. "We're following these particular formative years of the rebellion, as well as the Empire." And like in *Rogue One*, those people find themselves in a desperate place. "It's always an extraordinary moment of time when people are under pressure to wake up and stand up for who they are, and are prepared to make sacrifices," Wohlenberg adds.

Andor's story is intertwined with that of Mon Mothma — the legendary Rebel leader from the Original Trilogy, who returned in *Rogue One*, played by Genevieve O'Reilly (previously cast in the role for a scene cut from 2005's *Episode III — Revenge Of The Sith*). Her arc across the five years will prove tumultuous. "In *Rogue One*, she's a leader of the Rebellion. When we start *Andor*, she's steeped in Empire," O'Reilly explains. Mothma has a long, complicated involvement with the Galactic Senate, which sees her wrestling with autocracy while trying to implement change from within. "That's where we start," says O'Reilly. "Now, we know she fails, right? That's exciting."

It all adds up to a show aiming to dig deeper into the dirt of the *Star Wars* universe than any story that's come before. "If *Star Wars* is a very successful hotel or restaurant, we're in the kitchen," says Gilroy. "We're the molecular, the granular, we're behind, underneath. We've got 1,500 pages of script to tell that story. So we have a lot of things to say, and we explore pretty deeply." Strap in for one ambitious incoming square meal. **BEN TRAVIS**

ANDOR IS ON DISNEY+ FROM 31 AUGUST

No./2

How Ahsoka is launching a new wave of Rebels

ROSARIO DAWSON and more tell us what to expect in their live-action spin-off

FROM HER FIRST live-action appearance in *The Mandalorian* Season 2, picking off a band of masked goons one by one with her dual white lightsabers, to her fleeting yet magnetic return in *The Book Of Boba Fett*, Rosario Dawson's Ahsoka Tano has clearly been destined for bigger things. And now the former Padawan from Dave Filoni's animated show *Star Wars: Rebels*, co-created by Filoni and George Lucas and a solid fan favourite, will get her own spin-off series.

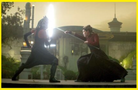
"Dave and Jon [Favreau] are continuing *Star Wars* in a way where it can be standalone but it also makes you hungry for more," Dawson tells *Empire* at Star Wars Celebration, teasing revelations that even *Rebels* die-hards aren't expecting. "There have been two instances where she's shown up on a mission, you see how she's interacting with folks, but you don't really get *her*, per se. Even fans who've lived with her for so long don't know where she's at now in this journey."

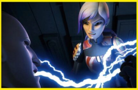
And Ahsoka won't be alone. The series will bring other characters from *Rebels* across to live action in the Mando-verse, with footage teasing a glimpse of green-hued Twi'lek Hera Syndulla, and the explosive Sabine Wren — with Natasha Liu Bordizzo now officially on board in the latter role.

In *Rebels*, Wren had quite the ride — an artistically minded Mandalorian warrior with a penchant for blowing things up, she accidentally created a Mando-frazzling weapon for the Empire, fought to destroy it, sided with the Rebels, and helped create the iconic Rebellion symbol with her phoenix-rising graffiti tag. "Sabine is so fearless and brave, with so much grace, but she still has flaws," Bordizzo tells *Empire*. "She's not perfect, she's on her journey, she's making mistakes. And it's very high stakes in this galactic war, to make mistakes."

While there's a lot of backstory to these characters, newcomers to *Rebels* needn't fear about feeling left out. "A lot of people have not seen *Rebels*," Bordizzo acknowledges. "It's great for them to have seen it, but we've got a standalone chapter as it is." Godspeed, Rebels. **BEN TRAVIS**

AHSOKA IS ON DISNEY+ IN 2023





Top to bottom: Rosario Dawson as Ahsoka Tano; Meeting with the Mandalorian (Pedro Pascal); Ahsoka takes on the Magistrate (Diana Lee Inosanto); Sabine Wren — set to be played by Natasha Liu Bordizzo.

No./3 Where Star Wars goes next...

Expect fresh stories and familiar faces from the upcoming slate of adventures

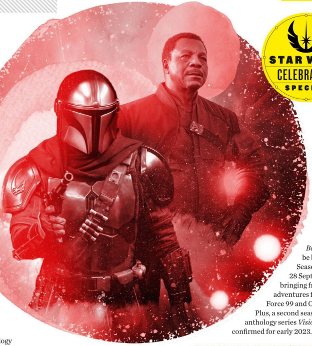


ILLUSTRATION **RUSSELL MOORCROFT**

STAR WARS CELEBRATION SPECIAL

SKELETON CREW IS ASSEMBLING

Previously known only under codename 'Grammar Rodeo' (a deep-cut *Simpsons* reference), the new live-action series from Christopher Ford and MCU *Spider-Man* trilogy director Jon Watts is officially titled *Star Wars: Skeleton Crew*. It's primarily about a group of kids lost in the galaxy, but the big casting news was that Jude Law will star in it (presumably not de-aged as a youngling). "It stars four kids, but it is not a kids' show," Watts said at Star Wars Celebration, confirming that it takes place in the *Mandalorian* era of the timeline, a few years after *Return Of The Jedi*.

MANDO'S GOING TO MANDALORE

Finally. In Season 3 of *The Mandalorian*, our hero will go to Mandalore. Plus, he'll be reunited with pals including Greef Karga, aka Carl Weathers — who's also returning behind the camera as a director, with an episode even more high-octane than Season 2's 'The Siege'. "There was a bit more [action], I think, in this one," he reveals to *Empire*, adding that it has "many, many different kinds of stories within the story. For me, that's the joy."

A BADDER BATCH

The animated arm of *Star Wars* continues to thrive. Dave Filoni's *Clone Wars* spin-off *The Bad Batch* will be back for Season 2 on 28 September, bringing fresh adventures for Clone Force 99 and Omega. Plus, a second season of anthology series *Visions* is confirmed for early 2023.

QUI-GON WILL RETURN (AGAIN)

On the animated front, there's also a whole new show to look forward to: *Tales Of The Jedi*. Three of its six short episodes are about a young Ahsoka Tano, while the other three are about Count Dooku in his Jedi years, before he joined the Sith. And if you'll remember, Dooku's apprentice was none other than Liam Neeson's *The Phantom Menace* Jedi, Qui-Gon Jinn. As if *that* cameo in *Obi-Wan* wasn't enough, Neeson will be back to voice the character in *Tales*, joined by his son Micheál Richardson. **BEN TRAVIS**

No./4 RETURN OF THE FRIK

Babu Frik (or at least, his Anzellan species) will return in *The Mandalorian* Season 3. Here's why we're Frikkin' excited

BABU MEETS GROGU?

Babu Frik and Grogu could share screentime in the ultimate weird-but-cute showdown. Both became immediate online obsessions, and bringing them together would be the *Star Wars* galaxy's greatest break-the-internet moment. If they fight over a small blue space-frog or a delicious macaron? Even better.

THE SEQUELS SHINE THROUGH

One of *The Mandalorian*'s greatest strengths is the way it combines all eras of *Star Wars*' extensive canon, though it skews more towards planets and creatures from the Original and Prequel trilogies. But the arrival of Anzellans is a sign of more sequel-era creations breaking through.

PRACTICAL PUPPETEERING REIGNS

Nothing says '*Star Wars* magic' more than practical creature effects, and Babu Frik was one of *Rise Of Skywalker*'s greatest mini-marvels, with on-set engineers manipulating his freaky little form. Judging by the footage at Celebration, we may be in store for not one but three practical Anzellans.

"HEHEYYY!"

If an Anzellan doesn't erupt into a "Heheyyy!" at an opportune moment, is it even really an Anzellan? Babu's catchphrase had J.J. Abrams cracking up on the *Rise* set, and Steven Spielberg is a fan. Three Anzellans — or more — means the loudest "HEHEYYY!" ever. **BEN TRAVIS**

THE MANDALORIAN SEASON 3 IS ON DISNEY+ IN FEBRUARY 2023

No./5

“*Emily* is sad and dark. *Barbie* is funny and silly and pink”

[THE Q&A] **From the school corridors of *Sex Education* to Parisian biopics and Hollywood comedies, EMMA MACKEY is making waves**

Top to bottom: Emma Mackey, putting her best foot forward; With Romain Duris (as Gustave Eiffel) in period drama *Eiffel*.

THOUGH PERHAPS KNOWN best for playing student Maeve in Netflix’s very British comedy *Sex Education*, Emma Mackey in fact spent the first 17 years of her life growing up in France. With *Eiffel*, a French-language period drama about Gustave Eiffel, the man behind the iconic Parisian monument, the Francophone actor returns to home soil as the engineer’s forbidden love, Adrienne Bourgès. She tells *Empire* about a trip back across the Channel, her hopes of directing, and how she’s embracing the plastic fantastic world of Greta Gerwig’s *Barbie*.

What interested you about *Eiffel*?
The script came to me at the same time as *Death On The Nile*, just as the first season of *Sex Education* had come out. I hadn’t really done anything else; I definitely hadn’t done a period piece or a French-speaking film. It seemed like a nice way into French cinema, because it’s one of the Frenchest films you could possibly think of.

Did you find the lack of information on Adrienne challenging?
There’s actually nothing about her. We know that she and Gustave [Eiffel] were meant to be married. There were even napkins with an “E” embroidered on them. Obviously, it never happened and the marriage was stopped because of her parents. That much is true. It is freeing in a way because she’s just a character. The whole concept of the film is fiction.

What are you looking forward to people seeing in *Sex Education* Season 4?
I’m excited for the American side of things [Mackey’s character decided to join a US study programme in Season 3’s finale], and whether that will open up different avenues or personalities for Maeve. American people are very different. I feel like they create more opportunities [for themselves]. It’ll be great to see her outside of Moordale [High School], like how we’ve seen Ncuti [Gatwa]’s character in Nigeria. Maeve has never left Moordale or her campsite, so this is going to be a big deal.

You’re playing Emily Brontë in an upcoming biopic. How was that experience?
It was a very intense six weeks in the Lake District and Yorkshire. Leeds was the first place that I lived in the UK, so going back up there felt like coming full circle. It was very demanding. Emily Brontë is a pretty monumental figure of literature, so I felt very privileged to be able to play a character like that.

You’ve previously called Greta Gerwig your movie icon. Did working with her on *Barbie* live up to that?
She’s everything I could have dreamed of. She’s so invested and precise, and so childishly delighted by what she’s doing. Scorsese said, “Never lose the amateur in you.” I see Greta behind her monitor laughing, and she’ll reference something very niche and it will make total sense in that moment. Her mind is fizzing all the time. I love being around those kinds of people. And it’s great to do comedy, because *Emily* was a sad, dark drama. *Barbie* is light and funny and silly and American and pink.

You’ve said that you hope to direct one day. Did you learn anything from working on the film?
I would come and sit on set on my days off and watch. You need to understand how sets work and what everyone’s job is; I think a lot of directors don’t understand that. You also need to be passionate, willing to collaborate, and precise in what you want. If I’m going to be a director, I want to be the best one. I want to be ready. I want to be fully invested.

Table tennis is apparently a favourite pastime on set for the *Barbie* cast. Have you been playing along?
I’ve only played with Scott Evans, and we’re quite equally matched. Right in the beginning, we had a sleepover for the Barbies, which would involve playing games with Scott and [*Sex Education* co-star] Ncuti. I don’t play games usually, because I get so competitive and angry. But Scott and I were top of the game. **IANA MURRAY**

EIFFEL IS IN CINEMAS FROM 12 AUGUST

Taghi Naderzad/Contour by Getty Images, Getty Images

No./6 Why Bradley Cooper was destined to make Maestro

Here: Music, maestro. Bradley Cooper as composer Leonard Bernstein in the upcoming biopic. **Below:** Cooper and the real Bernstein.

The actor-director's Leonard Bernstein biopic is the perfect showcase for his sensibilities

IF YOU'VE EVER had a song from *West Side Story* stuck in your head, or heard the infectious melodies of Stanley Donen's sailors-on-leave musical *On The Town*, you probably have Leonard Bernstein to thank. The ingenious composer, pianist and orchestra-conductor worked prolifically during the mid-20th century, collaborating with the writers and lyricists of both of those classic Hollywood films.

It's no wonder, then, that Bradley Cooper, director-star of the most recent adaptation of *A Star Is Born*, is to make Bernstein the focus of his second filmmaking effort. Cooper clearly has an affinity for musical subject matter and a strong singing voice to boot, so his next project, currently being shot in New York, seems like a logical choice.

Bernstein's contributions to cinema were staggering, but only account for a fraction of his musical legacy. Awarded nearly every major plaudit in his lifetime from 1918 to 1990, his career was burnished by historical import at every turn. He was asked to memorialise John F. Kennedy in an address at Madison Square Garden after his assassination, and concluded his career playing Beethoven in a live televised concert to celebrate the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Although the material for a Bernstein film was originally developed by Steven Spielberg, Cooper convinced him to hand it over and serve as executive producer instead, such was Cooper's passion for the project (Martin Scorsese and Todd Phillips also hold executive producer credits). As the actor-director once reflected, "I wanted to be a conductor since I was a kid."

The Netflix-backed biopic, entitled *Maestro*, features Carey Mulligan as Bernstein's wife Felicia Montealegre, and Maya Hawke as Jamie, Bernstein's oldest daughter. Cooper himself, who plays the composer at a later stage of life, is unrecognisable in first looks after a remarkable make-up and prosthetics transformation.

With the film set to span several decades of Bernstein's life, and to include at least one of the affairs he had as a closeted gay man, expect Cooper to pull out all the stops for what will surely be a strong awards contender come 2023. **CHRISTINA NEWLAND**

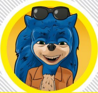
MAESTRO IS ON NETFLIX IN 2023

[TREND REPORT]

No./7 OFF-BRAND ICONS

These warped movie riffs on classic, much-loved figures are the stuff of chaos and nightmares

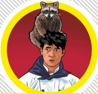
WORDS **BETH WEBB**
ILLUSTRATIONS **BILL McCONKEY**



UGLY SONIC

CHIP 'N DALE: RESCUE RANGERS

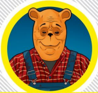
'Ugly Sonic' in all his rejected glory is a highlight of this meta reboot. How was an outcast Sega character cleared for a Disney movie? We believe a pact with the Devil must have been involved.



RACCACOONIE

EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE ALL AT ONCE

Pixar's culinary genius rat is swapped for a raccoon in the Daniels' box office smash. This live-action furry fellow even gets his own storyline, involving a high-action rescue mission.



WINNIE THE POOH

WINNIE THE POOH: BLOOD AND HONEY

This upcoming slasher turns a beloved teddy bear into a violent killer. The film follows a feral Pooh and his hunt for human prey. This rumbly tumbly won't settle for honey alone, it seems.

TRAILER TALK

Black Adam

Unfiltered, uncensored, uncompromising trailer reactions from team EMPIRE

Mike Cathro (Deputy Art Director): Are they going to super-soldier him? He's looking quite thin here. Maybe they're going to get him zapped and hench.

Ben Travis (Deputy Online Editor): He comes from the *Shazam!* side of the DC Universe. He's like the antihero equivalent of Shazam. He's also wearing really old trousers. Are those trousers a thing?

Beth Webb (News Editor): He definitely seems smaller. Dwayne's usually the kind of size where I wonder where he goes to get his day-to-day clothes. He's so broad.

Ben: Well, there's a shop in south-east London that is literally called Beefy Boys. Maybe there's also one called Buff Boys, and that's where The Rock gets all his clothes because he's a giant, buff man.

Mike: It looks like they've put The Rock's face on...

Ben: ... Vin Diesel!

Mike: I was going to say a normal person.

Ben: He does look quite skinny, you're right.

Alex Godfrey (Features Editor): Are you saying this is a scrawny man? Because I would kill to look like that.

Mike: So would I, being the beanpole that I am.

Sophie Butcher (Social Media Editor): Do you shop at Beanpole Boys, Mike?

Alex: Mike and I are going to start a band called The Beanpoles.

Beth: James can join as well, with his guitar.

Alex: Pierce Brosnan's doing a very good Pierce Brosnan impression here.

Beth: "Nothing but heartache" sounds like one of the songs he sings in *Mamma Mia! Here We Go Again*.

Ben: Is he going to burst into 'S.O.S.'?

Sophie: So he's Doctor Fate, who I'm assured is DC's equivalent to Doctor Strange.

Beth: He gets to wear a lovely cravat, which puts him a head above Strange in my eyes.

Ben: Does DC actually stand for "Dashing Cravat"?

Mike: This looks like it could be a sequel to *The Scorpion King*.

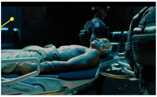
Alex: Daniel Kaluuya is wearing that *Scorpion King* hoodie in *Nope*. Are we witnessing a *Scorpion King* resurgence?

Beth: Maybe?

Alex: I knew the world would come round to that film sooner or later.

Sophie: I can't believe we've got this far into the trailer and nobody's said yet that the hierarchy of power in the DC Universe is about to change.

Ben: We've covered a lot of ground here already: The Rock has been killed, and brought back to life in a goop chamber. Maybe he got the goop chamber from Gwyneth Paltrow.



Alex: Has she switched from Marvel to DC, then?

Ben: She just turns up on film sets selling Goop products.

Sophie: The little torches we just saw in that cave were actually vagina candles.

Ben: "I kneel before nobody" feels like a *Superman* reference, right? Because everybody's saying that...

Sophie: ... that the power of the DC Universe is about to change?

Ben: ... that there's going to be some beef between Superman and Black Adam. So kneeling before no-one feels like a dig at Zod.

Alex: Might it be a reference to him being a slave instead?

Beth: The layers on this character!

Sophie: This is Atom Smasher. What a name.

Mike: Is he really big, or is the city really small?

Ben: He's just off to smash some atoms and then he'll be right back.

Beth: "Does anyone want anything? Just off to smash some atoms."

Alex: He's never met an atom that he didn't smash.

Ben: So Black Adam's supposed to be a kind of antihero. In the comics, he's an unrepentant, powerful badass guy who doesn't really care either way. But with The Rock, he can't not be a hero, right?

Alex: I can't imagine him not being heroic in some way.

Ben: Apparently he's been fancast in the role for years, because he's been talking the film up so much. Mostly because he's absolutely ripped. And you know who's absolutely ripped in the comics? Black Adam. But I do hope they get to push that edge that the character has a bit.

Mike: Yeah, he needs to be at least a little bit evil.

Ben: It's like if you're going to massacre a bunch of chickens, show the massacre. Don't cut away like in *Venom*. I think I'm going off on a bit of a tangent here.

Beth: Whoa, Ben.

Mike: By the way, is his name actually Adam? Given where he's come from, that seems like quite an average name to me.

Sophie: It might be like an Adam and Eve thing?

Beth: I like to think he's just a lad called Adam.

BLACK ADAM IS IN CINEMAS FROM 21 OCTOBER

Getty Images

No./8 NEXT IN THE SERIES

You fell in love with that incredible new TV show. And then it ended! Don't despair — Boyd Hilton recommends the sibling shows to watch next

IF YOU LOVED…
THE STAIRCASE

THE STAIRCASE

(NETFLIX)

Yes, before the drama mini-series *The Staircase*, there was the 13-part documentary *The Staircase*. Or to be more accurate, first there was a 2004 series, made by director Jean-Xavier de Lestrade, covering the case of whether writer Michael Peterson killed his wife Kathleen. De Lestrade returned to the story in 2012 and made further episodes, this time for Netflix, who aired all 13 eps in 2018. Intriguingly, de Lestrade is a "character" in the HBO mini-series, played by Vincent Vermignon. But if you haven't yet caught up with this original "factual" telling of this remarkable saga, you really must.

THE SINNER: SEASON 1

(NETFLIX)

Antonio Campos, the showrunner of the *Staircase* limited series, proved his crime-drama directing skills when he made the first few episodes of superior anthology show *The Sinner* in 2017. The relentlessly gripping eight-parter stars Jessica Biel as a seemingly likeable mother and wife who stabs a man to death with a fruit-peeler. How she is connected to him and how she ends up in such a psychotic state forms the crux of a story whose twists and turns culminate in that rare thing — a satisfying ending.

CRUEL SUMMER

(PRIME VIDEO)

If you like complicated stories with multiple timelines, then it's well worth checking out this ten-part drama which feels so authentic it seems like a true story, even though it's purely fictional. It explores what happens when Kate (Olivia Holt), a popular teenage girl, goes missing, and Jeanette (Chiara Aurelia) attempts to take her place. Despite jumping around between 1993, '94 and '95 while exploring the same events from different characters' points of view, it never feels gimmicky, but portrays the dangers of class prejudice and media sensationalism with acute intelligence.

PIECES OF HER

(NETFLIX)

Despite mainly being seen in flashback, Toni Collette's performance as Kathleen Peterson in *The Staircase* is as nuanced as you'd expect from one of the finest actors out there. But for a full Collette masterclass, look no further than this recent series which kicks off with a stunningly intense sequence, ending up with Collette's character hailed as a local hero. This incident sparks a fascinating puzzle of a story, dealing with fake identities, cult religious figures and more, smartly adapted from Karin Slaughter's novel.

THE STAIRCASE IS OUT NOW ON SKY/NOW

No./9 Joker Face

With rumours of Lady Gaga playing Harley Quinn in a musical *Joker* sequel, we compile a list of the pop star's suitable megahits

BAD ROMANCE

The Gaga classic would be a perfect dark and sombre opener for this doomed love story. Picture it: "I want your ugly, I want your disease, I want your everything as long as it's free," Gaga would croon, as a macabre meet-cute plays out on screen.

APPLAUSE

For *Joker: Folie À Deux*, Gaga could recreate the iconic stair street-dancing sequence while singing a glacial rendition of her spotlight-craving floor filler. "I live for the applause," she declares repeatedly in the song, a Harley mantra if ever there was one.

STUPID LOVE

All Harley ever wanted was love. Sure, it's the love of Joker, her former Arkham Asylum patient and a mass-murdering psychopath who gets a kick out of tormenting her. And yet, as Gaga sings: "I don't need a reason. Not sorry, I want your stupid love."

YOU AND I

No matter which Joker/Harley story director Todd Phillips decides to tell, these two are the model of toxicity. So a song about an obsessive couple who haven't seen each other in some time, where one would rather die than be without the other? Soundtrack gold.

REBECCA LEWIS

No./10

She-Hulk is ready for her close-up

TATIANA MASLANY on stepping up as Marvel's brainy, brawny new addition

TAKE AWAY THE green, six-foot-plus superhero at the heart of *She-Hulk: Attorney At Law* and you're essentially left with a modern-day *Ally McBeal*. As Jennifer Walters, Tatiana Maslany plays a sharp but struggling lawyer whose courtroom shenanigans by day transition into a colourful dating life at night. When a near-fatal accident leads to a blood transfusion from her uncle — who, being Bruce Banner (Mark Ruffalo), has his own set of problems — Jennifer becomes ultra-strong and, reluctantly, the centre of attention. Speaking to *Empire*, Maslany breaks down the process of going green in Marvel's superhero workplace caper.

SCHOOLING UP

Ruffalo, who has played Hulk for over a decade and fills the role of Jennifer's mentor in the show, was a reliable source of inspiration. "We were so goofy, like two kids who had been handed shovels by our parents and told to go and play in the sandbox," says Maslany. She also devoured as many *She-Hulk* comics as possible, drawing on different artists' iterations of the superhero for the comedy and hyper-awareness required. And she listened to music. "I always come back to Sophie, who's this amazing trans artist who unfortunately died last year," she says. "What I love about Sophie's music is this combo of organic and electrical, industrial-type sounds that felt connected to She-Hulk."

REJECTING GREAT RESPONSIBILITY

"She really is the antithesis of most superhero narratives," Maslany explains of her character. Things start off on familiar turf for Jennifer's trajectory: an accident leads to superpowers. Rather than adjusting to the change, however, and learning to harness her powers, Jennifer veers the other way. "There's this great element of denial in her that's relatable," says Maslany. "For me, it was about rejecting what's happened for as long as I could, as that's what causes the fun tension between Jennifer and She-Hulk."

WORKING IT

Maslany tapped into Jennifer's hardcore work ethic as her character transitions from a small law firm to the face of a superhuman (beings who often hold abnormal physical power) law division. "She's in a career that's male-dominated and incredibly vicious and hierarchal," she says. "When she's heading this superhuman firm, that's where we get some really fun characters that she's either defending or in opposition of. It's like this really absurd take on a legal show." Her new public persona attracts a new foe, Jameela Jamil's Titania, who rivals She-Hulk in terms of superstrength. "Jameela's very vocal on political issues and I think she drew on that, and was able to sort of wink at those things, when she was approaching this character," says Maslany.

Clockwise from main: Everything's gone green: She-Hulk (Tatiana Maslany) makes an entrance; Jameela Jamil as She-Hulk's enemy, Titania; Law and order: Maslany as legal genius Jennifer Walters; Don't make him angry: Mark Ruffalo returns as Hulk/Bruce Banner.

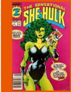
TAKING UP SPACE

Unsurprisingly, performing as a character at least double her size was new to Maslany. "You feel like a dork, but somehow also cool at the same time," she laughs, while describing the pyjama-like mo-cap suit and platform shoes she had to wear, which formed the basis of the CG character seen on screen. The actor workshopped her character's movements with Ruffalo. "[We] talked about how [the process] separates us from the other superheroes, which works for our characters as they're outsiders." Maslany also enjoyed She-Hulk's effortless strength. "She's not a trained fighter at all; she could just flick someone and they'd go flying," she adds. This is one lawyer you don't want to find you guilty. **BETH WEBB**

SHE-HULK: ATTORNEY AT LAW IS ON DISNEY+ FROM 17 AUGUST

SHE-HULK! SMASH! FOURTH! WALL!

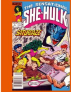
Long before Deadpool, Jennifer Walters set the precedent for immensely fun meta-comedy



SENSATIONAL SHE-HULK #1
SECOND CHANCE

1989

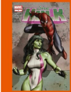
Seminal *She-Hulk* scribe John Byrne ripped up the rulebook, exploring Jennifer's meta comic awareness. In issue #1, she calls Marvel "cheap" and satirically addresses the reader over the all-too-familiar 'filler' nature of comics.



SENSATIONAL SHE-HULK #5
THE DOCTOR IS IN!

1989

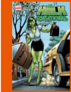
Following She-Hulk's panel-defying antics, Byrne takes the meta-adventures to the next level by throwing her into a collection of cartoons, encountering parodies of *The Flintstones*, *Robo-Cop* and more.



SHE-HULK #4
WEB OF LIES

2004

This comic showcases Jennifer Walter's legal acumen, representing Spidey as part of a multi-million-dollar lawsuit against *The Daily Bugle*. Cue double the amount of quips, hilarious Bat-Signal rip-offs and a dinner date with J. Jonah Jameson's son.



SHE-HULK: SENSATIONAL #1
THE SHE-HULK STORY THAT'S A RIFF ON CHRISTMAS CAROL

2010

Annoyed with the narration reminding her of her birthday, She-Hulk literally tears down the caption from the panel in a fit of rage. That's before she groans at a magical Stan Lee guiding her through a brilliantly bonkers riff on the Charles Dickens classic. **NICOLA AUSTIN**

Ray Liotta, photographed for the October 2012 issue of *Empire*.

“Ray was just fucking magnetic”

[IN MEMORIAM]

Joe Carnahan remembers his longstanding collaborator and friend, the late RAY LIOTTA

I WAS SITTING on a Zoom when a text popped up in the corner of the screen from my friend:

“Ray Liotta died.”

That’s all it said.

I felt an immediate flush of tears flood my eyes and awkwardly excused myself.

“Ray Liotta died.”

I kept rereading it.

Some essential part of me felt like it had been punched loose. This weird vertigo overtook me, then this momentary panic, like I had missed something absolutely *vital* and there was no getting it back now.

This was the man most responsible for my career. This was my go-to guy over four separate films. I lived at his house for weeks on end. He came up north for a screening of *NARC* on a moment’s notice because we were raising money for cancer. He kissed my Aunt Janette’s hand and thanked her profusely when she told him she was a schoolteacher.

Ray was always just Ray. He made time for people. I never saw him refuse an autograph or a picture. He was far more interested in what you were doing than what he had done.

And now he was gone… and I would never speak to him again, or hear that fantastic laugh of his. So, as a balm of sorts, I turned on *NARC* and got to the moment in the film where, I remember distinctly, feeling like a true filmmaker for the first time in my life… and I remembered what Ray had said to me that day, that I will never, ever forget.

There’s a scene in the movie where Ray’s character, Lieutenant Henry Oak, talks about his deceased wife and what she meant to him. I decided I wanted to shoot it through the front windshield, with the reflection of the surrounding trees over the glass, so it would be difficult to make out Oak’s face at times, adding to the mystery surrounding his character, as the camera tracked around the car and wound up in a close-up.

Ray was just fucking magnetic and magical in that scene, and I found myself crying as it went on. It was utterly transportive. I was listening to my words being performed by one of the best actors of this or any other generation, and it knocked me flat.

It was about a six-page scene, so after the first take, he got out of the car and found me wiping my eyes, mid-sob. I gave him a hug and he said, “I guess it’s working, huh?” We shot it a few more times and I was crying after every take. I finally went to the driver’s side of the car and kneeled down and told him, “I think we got it.” He looked at me and said, “You sure?” I nodded, and he smiled and said, “I could do it another 50 times.” Then he got out of the car and looked at me and said, “You’re gonna be alright, Joe Carnahan.” I replied with something like, “Man, I hope so.” And then Ray looked at me and

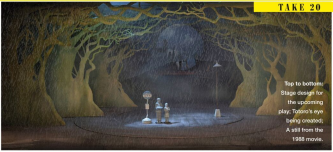
Kurt Iswarienko/Trunk Archive, Alamy, Joe Carnahan, Tracy Falco

Top to bottom: Joe Carnahan with Liotta on the set of *Stretch* in 2014; The actor as Lieutenant Henry Oak in *NARC*; Liotta with Ryan Reynolds in *Smokin' Aces* (2006).

repeated it: "You're gonna be alright, Joe Carnahan… because you care." And then he clapped me on the shoulder and walked away, immediately making a joke with the wardrobe assistant. I just hung back and watched him. I knew instinctively that he intended for this moment to mean something to me… and it did. I had his friendship and his support, but I don't think it was until that moment that I had his trust as a filmmaker.

I never lost track of Ray. We would text on occasion. Always looking for a way to get back on a set with one another but, like a lot of things in our lives, time just got away from us. Family, professional commitments, all the usual suspects. You think you have forever and then a text pops up on your computer one day that reminds you, in the most blunt and brutal of ways, how fleeting and fickle all of this really is.

I loved Ray and will always hold that moment on set as something very special. I wish I could have told him how much I did indeed care; about him, about the work we did together, about the things I learned from him that have influenced me to this day. I will miss my friend. I will think of him often. I will mourn him occasionally and, most of all, I will seek comfort in that singular memory he gave me.



Top to bottom: Stage design for the upcoming play; Totoro's eye being created; A still from the 1988 movie.

No./12

How Totoro made his stage debut

Director Phelim McDermott on the daunting challenge of adapting My Neighbour Totoro for the theatre

TOTORO IS AN icon. Studio Ghibli's 1988 seminal animated masterpiece *My Neighbour Totoro* told the story of two young girls who, while worrying about their ill mother, wander into a forest and encounter a cuddly woodland spirit they christen Totoro — plus a magical bus shaped like a cat. Totoro has since become the unofficial mascot of Studio Ghibli, beloved by several generations of children and adults alike. He's also bloody massive. How on Earth do you translate all that into a live-action puppet stage production?

"It's still in process," says Phelim McDermott, the veteran theatre director tasked with adapting the classic film into an ambitious stage show that plays at London's Barbican Theatre from October. It's a process that has been in the works for over four years, with the puppets, excitingly, currently being built by Jim Henson's Creature Shop in Los Angeles.

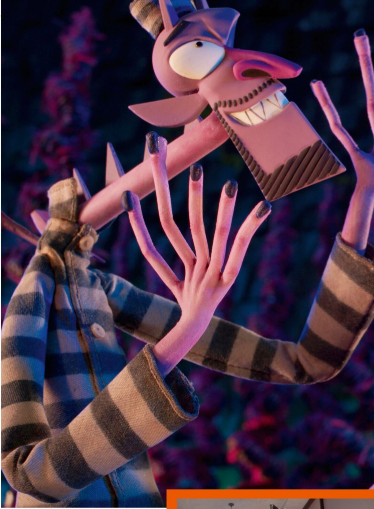
McDermott — who has staged operas with composer Philip Glass featuring extensive puppetry — got the gig after receiving the blessing of *Totoro*'s original composer, Joe Hisaishi, who is executive-producing the stage show. "In my interview, Joe asked, 'How are you going to do the puppetry?'" McDermott recalls. "And I said, 'Well, I don't know. We'll have to ask the spirits.' That was the right answer at that moment. It was kind of a joke, but also serious, to me." Ghibli ultimately gave the project its blessing, under Hisaishi's supervision; the show's playwright, Tom Morton-Smith, met with the film's legendary director Hayao Miyazaki for his stamp of approval. ("I'm hoping that I will at some point get to meet Miyazaki," McDermott says, "but I think only a precious few are allowed into the inner temple.")

Working with puppetry expert Basil Twist, McDermott and his team are currently buried in the process of convincingly turning a seven-foot fantasy character into reality. "The big challenge is going to be scale," he says. "There are going to be moments where you see the puppeteers do stuff — like the Japanese tradition of *kuroko* stagehands dressed in black. And then there should be moments where you go: 'How did they do *that*?' I feel like there's magic in revealing and there's magic in hiding."

While some details are being ironed out, a few are already set. Though McDermott is keen to emphasise that "it's not a musical", Hisaishi's famous score will be performed live on stage by a 14-piece orchestra. Casting is still in the works, but the team was clear that "this is a Japanese story, and our casting has to reflect that culture"; the human cast interacting with the puppets will be of Asian heritage. And on the biggest question for Ghibli aficionados, McDermott is happy to confirm: "Yes, there will be a Catbus." The spirits of the forest will be pleased.

JOHN NUGENT

MY NEIGHBOUR TOTORO IS ON AT THE BARBICAN THEATRE FROM 8 OCTOBER



No./13

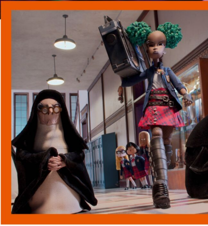
Inside Henry Selick's demonic return

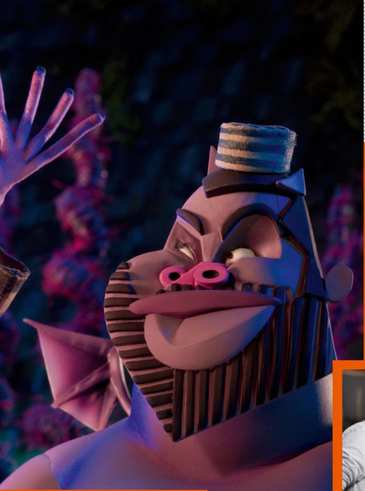
The stop-motion master is back with WENDELL & WILD, with help from Jordan Peele

SUPERSTITIOUS PEOPLE may call the production of *Wendell & Wild* cursed. For the feature follow-up to Henry Selick's 2009 stop-motion masterpiece *Coraline*, the pandemic — which halted the film's hand-operated animation — was just one of its problems. There was a forest fire that got so close to the film's studio in Portland that the crew had to evacuate all the puppets. "We had to wrap them in blankets, throw them in vehicles and drive away," Selick tell *Empire*. Then there was the cold snap: "It plunged so cold, the faces on the puppets started to crack."

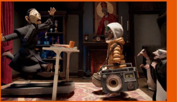
Yet *Wendell & Wild* defied the elements. The film — which follows two demon brothers who enlist a 13-year-old girl to help them escape the underworld — is a collaboration between Selick, Jordan Peele and Keegan-Michael Key, who both co-wrote and lent their voices to the film.

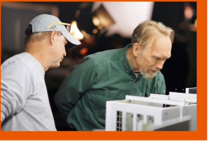
The project was born out of Selick's love of the comedians' sketch show *Key & Peele* (specifically the sketch 'Terries', which sees them play a pair of rogue anti-terrorist fighters with erratic facial hair). He reached out to Peele ahead of his *Get Out* success, to find that the appreciation was mutual. "We met up, and he talked about how his mom had dragged him to see *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (which Selick directed) when he was a kid. He got the toys and everything." So Selick presented his idea to him: "An old story of mine inspired by my sons when they were little. I thought of them as demonic at times, so I did a little drawing of them as demons and it just was Wendell and Wild."

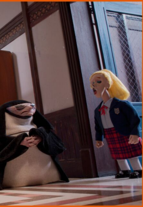




Below, top to bottom: Animator James Mendola hard at work; Preach! Father Bests (voiced by James Hong) holds court; Director Henry Selick (right) scrutinises the modelwork.







Above: Wendell (voiced by Keegan-Michael Key) and Wild (voiced by Jordan Peele). **Left:** Sister Daley (voiced by Michele Mariana), Kat (voiced by Lyric Ross), and Sister Chinstrap (voiced by Michele Mariana), causing quite a stir.

Like Selick, Peele has become known for overlapping comedy and the macabre, but also allegories of American racial and class politics — and so his and Selick's collaboration naturally moved in this direction. Kat (voiced by Lyric Ross) is a young Black girl going to a "fancy girls' school" following a stint in juvenile detention, a system Selick calls "brutal". While Kat's situation isn't the focus of this fantasy fable, Selick was glad to add a bite of realism, "a couple of things to give it some teeth".

Wendell & Wild shows its teeth in other ways too, through its embrace of the gnarling, gnashing sounds of punk music, which embody Kat's spirit. "She transforms herself behind closed doors into this Afro-punk princess," Selick explains. "When you see her with her dad's old boombox blasting this X-Ray Spex song with Poly Styrene singing, it makes my heart soar."

Punk also plays a part in exploring the intergenerational themes of the film, as the music forms a connection between Kat and her father. "A lot of the very first punk bands of the '70s were Black. There's Death, [Pure] Hell, Bad Brains. Then there's also this newer generation of Afro-punk," says Selick. "He was a first-gen fan and she's a new-gen fan."

Just like that coming-together of disparate people united by a common passion, *Wendell & Wild* has been made by a mix of generations, old collaborators and new — "a family of animation outcasts", as Selick fondly calls them. It's not just the results of what they make, but the journey of making them, which brings the filmmaker joy and keeps him coming back: "It's that environment and that tribe of people, that's what I love the most." Some curses, it seems, can be conquered.

KAMBOLE CAMPBELL

WENDELL & WILD IS ON NETFLIX THIS AUTUMN

No./14

The stories breaking motherhood taboos

A group of rising fiction-makers are using horror to present unexpected tales of the expecting

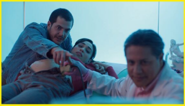
THE MIRACLE of birth gets the nightmare treatment in a fresh wave of films and TV seeking to change the narrative on motherhood. From a bloody yet heartfelt monster movie from Finland to a visceral, violent body horror from Mexico, four women are using their art to interrogate how their societies expect women to contribute, and what happens when they don't. They tell *Empire* about the powerful and often personal motivations behind their work.

HUESERA

Mexican writer-director Michelle Garza Cervera makes her feature-length debut with this bone-breaking body horror about an expectant mother, Valeria (Natalia Solien). As her pregnancy progresses, Valeria begins to reflect on the anti-establishment young punk she once was, which drives her to make a difficult choice. It's a personal story for Garza Cervera. "After my mum died in 2014, I began to learn about the story of my grandmother, who I'd grown up thinking of as a witch," she tells *Empire*. Her grandmother had left her children in her thirties. "Making a decision like that is a huge taboo in Mexico. Motherhood is like a religion," she adds. Previously the creator of horror shorts, Garza Cervera found the genre a way to simply and powerfully externalise the feelings of shame and confusion felt by Valeria. "Breaking bones was important to me, because it represents a woman breaking into pieces," she explains. Then, there are the spiders. "I was inspired by Louise Bourgeois, who makes these huge spider sculptures. She compares her fear of spiders with her relationship with her mother."

HATCHING

A twisted mother-daughter relationship lies at the heart of Hanna Bergholm's Finnish creature feature. Under constant scrutiny from her perfectionist parent, Tinja (Siiri Solalinna) finds herself bound to a bird-like monster that hatches secretly under her care. "It's totally deformed. It's like this smelly teenager that just wanted to be loved," Bergholm explains. The animatronic creature — made by regular *Star Wars* contributor Gustav Hoegen — embodies all the feelings of aggression and sorrow that Tinja feels under her mother's gaze ("In the Finnish language, 'hatching' also means 'brooding'"). Bergholm found power in the primitive story of a child not fully loved by their mother and the deep-rooted trauma that it can cause, adding a modern twist by making the latter a social-media personality who is fixated on portraying perfect happiness to an unseen audience. "They're both trying to please someone. I think in some way it relates to how women always have to work a bit harder in order to be accepted in society."



Clockwise from left: Siiri Solalinna in *Hatching*; The bird-like monster that emerges from the giant egg; Facing birthing difficulties in *Huesera*; Michelle de Swarte in *The Baby*.

THE BABY

Lucy Gaymer and Siân Robins-Grace's horror-comedy series follows 38-year-old Natasha (Michelle de Swarte), a childless woman in her late thirties, whose world is flipped when a baby with the mysterious ability to kill those who stand in his way crawls into her duty of care. "I had this image come to me of a baby falling through the sky, and a woman who doesn't want a baby catching it," Gaymer tells *Empire*. "I thought it would be funny for the show to begin that way." The pair wrote *The Baby* as an outlet for their feelings of confusion towards motherhood, specifically society's expectations around giving birth. "I thought I was going a bit mad," admits Robins-Grace. "This show came from that feeling of confusion, about how motherhood is presented as this universal, wonderful thing. But there's a huge amount of pain, trauma and complexity to it." A team of 30 were tasked with turning the baby into a true monster, including his killer deadpan stare. "There was a lot of 'Sticky, sticky, stick stick involved,'" says Gaymer, reciting the lyrics from 'The Stick Song' from CBeebies' show *Hey Duggee*. Sometimes the most terrifying things are better left off screen. **BETH WEBB**

HUESERA **DOES NOT YET HAVE A UK RELEASE DATE.**
HATCHING **IS IN CINEMAS FROM 16 SEPTEMBER.**
THE BABY **IS ON SKY ATLANTIC AND NOW FROM 7 JULY.**

Wholesome fantasy is back!

Willow sees Warwick Davis return for family-friendly, wizardy fun

SWORDS! SORCERY! Scoundrels! With its swashbuckling tone and George Lucas-penned story, Ron Howard's 1988 movie *Willow* was always on the family-friendly end of the fantasy scale — a quaint adventure in which Warwick Davis' burgeoning wizard has to save a magical baby from an evil queen's wrath. Now, 34 years later, Davis is back in Disney+'s *Willow* sequel series, set to bring the saga to a whole new generation. Fittingly, the show is a family affair — Willow's daughter in the series is played by Annabelle Davis, Warwick's own real-life child.

"Since she's been old enough, Annabelle's been forging her own career as an actress," he tells *Empire*. "To get her on to *Willow* and have her play my daughter was really wonderful. We had some great scenes together, and Jon [Kasdan, who co-developed the show] has already said that he sees a future for the character." It's not just Annabelle — Davis' son Harrison features in the series, too. "He's 19 now. He's exactly the same height and build as me, he walks the same as me — he's my perfect stunt double," Davis explains. "So any time Dad looked a bit decrepit and like he'd get injured, it was, 'Come on, Harrison, your turn to step up to the plate!'"

Beyond Davis' immediate family, *Willow* also unites familiar faces from the original movie — Ron Howard returns as executive producer, while Joanne Whalley reprises her role as warrior woman Sorsha. And just as the series brings in a younger generation of characters — with a new, fresh cast including *The Falcon And The Winter Soldier* alumnus Erin Kellyman, *The Serpent*'s Ellie Bamber, and *Mare Of Easttown*'s Ruby Cruz — it should also prove suitable viewing for a younger generation of audiences; the brutality of Westeros and dense mythology of Middle-earth are a world away from *Willow*.

"Every time a trailer would air for one of these new series — like *The Lord Of The Rings* show or *House Of The Dragon* — Ron and the producers and I would be like, 'We're still okay! We've got our own thing!'" laughs Kasdan. The key difference here? A sense of levity. "Warwick can't do anything without being hysterical. You see how much fun they're having. I think that distinguishes the tone of the show in a way we hope will really connect with people. The graveness and seriousness that a lot of fantasy has... maybe they'd like a break." For kids big and small, *Willow* awaits. **BEN TRAVIS**

Top to bottom: Warwick Davis returns as Willow Ufgood in Disney+'s *Willow*; Willow (Davis), Graydon (Tony Revolori), Boorman (Amar Chadha-Patel), Dove (Ellie Bamber), Kit (Ruby Cruz) and Jade (Erin Kellyman) in the new show; Willow, older — and wiser?

WILLOW **IS ON DISNEY+ FROM 30 NOVEMBER**

Under the influence: Maria Bakalova, Amandla Stenberg, Myha'la Herrold and Rachel Sennott.

No./16

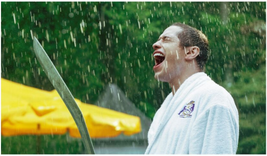
The Gen Z fable with a killer edge

BODIES BODIES BODIES puts a fresh spin on the slasher film

WHAT WOULD *MEAN Girls* look like if it was crossed with *Scream* and directed by John Cassavetes? Well, probably something like *Bodies Bodies Bodies*, a satirical, part-improvised and fiercely kinetic slasher about a gang of 'extremely online' female pals pitted against each other during a ferocious storm. "This group of friends is very seductive to me. They're very cool, but they're also very insecure and narcissistic," explains director Halina Reijn, who readily describes herself as the girl "who wasn't picked in gym class".

The film's concept — a game of Body Body (which tasks participants with identifying a hypothetical killer in the group) turns into a real murder-mystery — was dreamed up by Kristen Roupenian, whose short story *Cat Person* seized the internet in 2017. Surprisingly, Reijn is not a horror fan, but she couldn't resist the film's simple, powerful premise. "You just have one location, you put a couple of people into this pressure-cooker of a situation, and everything explodes," she explains. "That's what I wanted to make, but also try to make it funny."

Much of the film's humour can be attributed to its cast of bright, burgeoning comedy actors, including *Shiva Baby*'s beleaguered lead Rachel Sennott and *Borat Subsequent Moviefilm*'s breakout star Maria Bakalova. With the storm wiping out the power at the grand house in which the girls are staying (belonging to one of their boyfriends, played with crippling self-awareness by Pete Davidson), the girls had to perform in near-darkness for the majority of the film. Reijn, an actor herself, recalls going to dinners with the cast and writing down what they'd say to include in later iterations of the script, while also leaving space on set for them to improvise. "The key to being funny is to be able to look at all your bad sides," she says. "Rachel is a great example of an actor who is not vain at all, but who dares to be [on screen]."



Left: Pete Davidson as David, owner of the house where the action takes place. **Below:** Getting the party started.

Rejin also views *Bodies Bodies Bodies* as a cautionary tale coming from someone with a self-professed screen addiction ("Look, I've got three here with me now," she says gesturing to a small pile of technology on the table). "As soon as the reception goes, everything goes," she says of the film's plot. "And then violence happens because they've not actually been looking at what's been going on." Less *A Woman Under The Influence*, then, and more influencers under threat, *Bodies Bodies Bodies* could be the film to make you finally log off. **BETH WEBB**

BODIES BODIES BODIES **DOES NOT YET HAVE A UK RELEASE DATE**

Illustration by Mike Cathro

INTRODUCING...

Ben Ashenden & Alexander Owen

THE BRITISH COMEDY DUO THE PIN STEAL SCENES AS TYLER AND ANGUS IN *JURASSIC WORLD DOMINION*

ON GETTING INTO ACTING

Owen: The ecosystem of the business is that you do the [Edinburgh] Fringe, and it's like a showcase for what you do. From there, to our radio show; it's been a gradual evolution into doing more screen stuff, which is what we're focusing on.

Ashenden: When we spoke to Colin Trevorrow, he said that he'd seen us in Edinburgh. Little did we know, when we were doing that sketch show one day in a very hot, clammy, Edinburgh room, that the *Jurassic World* director would be in there.

ON PLAYING A BARISTA AND A CONTROL-ROOM TECH IN *JURASSIC WORLD DOMINION*

Ashenden: In the script for my coffee scene, I had one line — something like, "Here's your coffee, mate." But Colin said to me that I could improvise and muck around. One day I got a phone call at my hotel. It was Sam Neill, and he was like, "Do you want to talk through your scene?" Which is incredibly generous. I improvised and he wrote down the things he thought were funny.

Owen: I did have a funny moment with Jeff [Goldblum]. I was playing tennis with [fellow *Dominion* actor] Freya Parker and Jeff and his two sons took an interest in the game. So I got to play tennis with Jeff Goldblum standing on the sidelines, saying things like (*does Jeff Goldblum voice*), "Oh, it's a helluva backhand Alex. Great shot." Which I had not anticipated being part of my year.

Ashenden: On my last day, [Sam] gave me a bottle of wine that he made. I still haven't drunk it, because I was waiting for the right time. We also got to play games at night in the hotel with Laura Dern. We did lots of Pictionary.

ON BEING IN THE *JURASSIC* BUBBLE

Ashenden: It was strange being in that Venn diagram — making something and then taking the piss out of making it.

Owen: I know that Judd and Colin spoke to each other a fair bit about each other's projects. I think Colin put in a good word about us, so we hadn't completely screwed up on *Jurassic World*.

ON WHAT'S NEXT

Owen: We're continuing to work with both Colin and Judd. We're writing and acting in a crime-comedy film set in London, based on a true story, that Colin's producing and co-writing. We've been working on a television project with [Judd] for a little while. **SOPHIE BUTCHER**

JURASSIC WORLD DOMINION IS IN CINEMAS NOW

No./17

Jon Snow's next chapter

The brooding Game Of Thrones character is getting his own sequel series. Here's what he could get up to

TROUBLE BEYOND THE WALL

The White Walkers were one of the most fascinating aspects of *Game Of Thrones*' mythology, and could make a comeback despite being wiped out in the show's final season. As some cave paintings in Season 7 suggested, at least one other White Walker army may have been created as part of the legend of the Long Night some 8000 years earlier, meaning Jon Snow (Kit Harington) could face off against a new Night King.

AEGON & AEGON

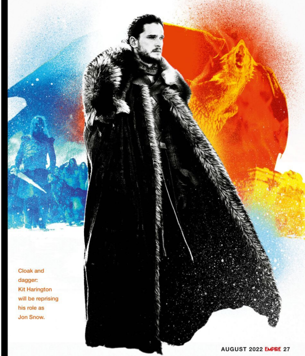
Jon (born Aegon) has a half-brother also, confusingly, called Aegon Targaryen. A major player in the books, Targaryen lives in secret under the alias Young Griff after escaping an assassination attempt by the Baratheon dynasty, and is a worthy heir to the throne. Here's hoping these half-brothers' paths cross.

JON THE DRAGONRIDER

Daenerys Targaryen's final dragon Drogon was last spotted flying East at the end of *Game Of Thrones*. Could Jon — also a Targaryen — become a dragonrider and help Drogon find more of his kind in an adventure exploring old Valyria and the ancient magical cities of Essos?

JON THE SKINCHANGER

If a long-standing theory is finally proven correct, the series may see Jon discovering and harnessing the same skinchanger abilities that Bran possesses, meaning he'll be able to control animals' minds. Yes, we could be seeing a Jon Crow in the near future. **NICOLA AUSTIN**



Cloak and dagger: Kit Harington will be reprising his role as Jon Snow.

No./18

How to teach an old monster new tricks

Director Dan Trachtenberg is breaking new ground with his *Predator* companion film, PREY

HE DIDN'T KNOW it at the time, but Dan Trachtenberg was already developing his *Predator* movie back in 1987, before he'd even watched the original. "I was dying to see it, but I was not allowed," says the director, who was six when *Predator* was released. "In third grade, I was on the way to a karate tournament with these [older kids] who had seen it, and over the entire trip they described the whole movie. I vividly remember them saying there was this character, Billy [Sonny Landham], a Native American scout who fights the Predator on the bridge over a waterfall." When Trachtenberg eventually saw the movie, that fight was nowhere to be seen (Billy dies off-screen). "I just thought, 'What?!' But that image captured my imagination." The thought

Clockwise from far left: Leap of faith — Amber Midthunder as Naru; Dane DiLiegro as the Predator; Director Dan Trachtenberg; The Predator flashes his shield; Itsee (Harlan Blayne Kytwayhat) takes aim.

stuck with him for 30 years and eventually led to his *Predator* prequel, *Prey*.

Set in the early 1700s, *Prey* follows Naru (Amber Midthunder), a young Native American woman from the Comanche tribe. Naru is training to be a warrior, a position usually reserved for men. Her developing skills are put to the most extreme test when she's confronted by a Predator, which has landed on the edge of her tribe's land, with advanced alien technology and a thirst for blood. Armed only with simple weapons, it becomes her mission to hold off the Predator and protect her people.

"I wanted to shift the focus to someone who would normally be a sidekick," says Trachtenberg. "In *Predator*, Billy was just one of the men on the team. In *Prey*, we're watching someone lead this movie that has never led this type of movie before." After lots of *Predator* movies in which people team up to beat the alien, Trachtenberg was keen to tell a story in which a single person must beat the seemingly unbeatable. "I wanted to make a survivor's story about someone who was really up against the impossible, to make it feel even more severe than those we had seen before."

The 1700s setting also pushed Trachtenberg to consider what the Predator's advanced alien technology would look like three centuries ago. "The key was I never wanted it to feel 'easier' for Naru," he says. "The premise is David versus Goliath — I didn't want to make Goliath smaller. It doesn't have its plasma caster, but it does have heat vision and other tools," including a spiffy shield that is both defence and weapon.

Prey is only Trachtenberg's second movie, following his 2016 spin-off hit, *10 Cloverfield Lane*. He actually pitched *Prey* to 20th Century Fox immediately after his debut film's release, but it took years, during which Fox was bought by Disney, for the film to get a greenlight. One thing he wanted to repeat from his first directing experience was to set himself an artistic limitation. In *10 Cloverfield Lane*, it was telling a story in a single setting. For *Prey*, it was using as little dialogue as possible. "It creates a guiding purpose for the storytelling," he says. "Telling a story primarily through actions, through human behaviour, I find that to be delightful."

The film does have some dialogue, which was originally intended to be all in Comanche (Trachtenberg is not Comanche, but producer Jhane Myers is, the cast are predominantly Native and First Nations actors, and the production worked with Juanita Pahdopony, a Comanche cultural consultant). Though the final film is in English, the cast all recorded their lines in Comanche too and a Comanche dub will be available on the film's Disney+ release. "It's a little more sophisticated than perhaps our memory of watching dubbed movies," Trachtenberg says. "There's a 'lip match' [choosing words to match the actors' mouth movements as closely as possible] that we do now. It won't be like watching old kung fu movies." One thing that sounds the same in any language: screaming. And there will be lots of that. **OLLY RICHARDS**

PREY **IS ON DISNEY+ FROM 5 AUGUST**

No./19

The art of creating dark and devious characters

From top: Ralph Fiennes and Jessica Chastain as David and Jo Henninger; Director John McDonagh on set with Chastain; The fun's over for David and party host Richard (Matt Smith).

THE FORGIVEN showcases John Michael McDonagh's flair for shady personalities

JOHN MICHAEL McDonagh's films are often packed with dark-natured characters, from Brendan Gleeson's unorthodox policeman in *The Guard* to Alexander Skarsgård and Michael Peña's bent cops in *War On Everyone*. His latest, an adaptation of Lawrence Osborne's novel, the psychological thriller *The Forgiven*, proves no different.

The story follows David and Jo Henninger, whose marriage is on the rocks even before they run over and kill a local Moroccan boy while on their way to a grand villa party. From there, David is taken on a journey of atonement through the desert, while Jo enjoys a lavish weekend of partying. *Empire* spoke to the director about how he brought four of his complex characters to life in the shadow of the Atlas Mountains.

DAVID HENNINGER
(RALPH FIENNES)

"He is one of those Pinter-esque characters, who says lots of witty and interesting things, but you're actually wondering, 'Are they a very nice person?' Probably not," says McDonagh. The filmmaker is aware that the readily disparaging character, who labels one of the party's organisers a "rent boy", may ruffle some feathers. "There's too much tendency now to take things at face value," he says. "It used to be that a character could say appalling things, and the audience would accept that, and know it's probably not the director's worldview."

JO HENNINGER
(JESSICA CHASTAIN)

Chastain was already familiar with her character Jo — an author caught in a creative and emotional rut — when she joined the film. "Jessica had been a fan of the book previously, so when I met her for rehearsal she was so invested that she picked out a few lines to re-include in the screenplay." McDonagh in turn added some of his signature dialogue to build up the character. "A lot of the acerbic dialogue she has is from me, rather than from Lawrence," he explains.

TOM DAY
(CHRISTOPHER ABBOTT)

Irresistibly drawn to Jo, financial analyst Tom on the surface appears ambivalent about the hedonism around him. "Chris and I discussed the fact that possibly everything Tom says is a lie," says McDonagh. Hinting at a potentially shared past with Dally (Caleb Landry Jones), the party's co-host, both Abbott and McDonagh decided that nothing Day said could be taken at face value. "Chris mentioned that his character's possibly like a Tom Ripley character, which was quite a good note that gave him something to play in every scene."

RICHARD GALLOWAY
(MATT SMITH)

Richard is the party's rakish other host, alongside Dally. "He was comic relief, and there to show the grandiosity of those kinds of parties fuelled by cocaine," explains McDonagh. Yet, in dealing with the locals, McDonagh believes the foppish host shows growth. The role sees Matt Smith break into new terrain as the extravagant yet increasingly conscientious character. "He comes through as one of the major performances in the film," says the filmmaker. Smith too may have embraced the dark side, then, and is all the better for it. **LUKE WALPOLE**

THE FORGIVEN IS IN CINEMAS FROM 2 SEPTEMBER

Marco Vittur

No./20

TOM CRUISE TAKE TWO

AS *TOP GUN: MAVERICK* CONTINUES TO SOAR AT THE BOX OFFICE, WE DREAM UP A FEW OPTIONS FOR THE STAR'S NEXT LEGACY SEQUEL

LEGEND II

Many moons after rescuing the land from Darkness, forest boy Jack O'Greene (Cruise) has become king of the fairy realm. But when some goblins steal his favourite hippogriff, he fears Darkness is back and quests off to finally destroy the horny devil by retrieving the Everglisten from the peak of Mount Wonderspire. Or something.

COCKTAIL 2: ANOTHER POUR

More than three decades after launching his bar franchise and settling down with love-of-his-life Jordan (Elisabeth Shue), Cruise's Brian Flanagan is ready to retire. But now he has to decide which of his twin offspring — cocky son Doug or steely daughter Vodka — should inherit the business. Time for… A mix-off!

COLE TRICKLE

NIGHTS OF THUNDER

Thirty-odd years after winning that big car race, racing-car driver Cole Trickle (Cruise) is still racing cars, even though he's too old. After being hired as crew chief for the hotshot car-racing son of his one-time rival Rowdy Burns (Michael Rooker), some car accidents happen, and Cole competes in one final big car race. He wins.

MAGNOLIAS

Twenty-two years after a mysterious frog storm changed the course of his life, former "Seduce And Destroy" pick-up artist, motivational speaker Frank T.J. Mackey (Cruise), is contacted by five twentysomethings revealing themselves to be children he never knew he had. They all spend the film's final 20 minutes silently judging him. **DAN JOLIN**

BLACK IN FOCUS

AMON WARMANN chews over the main moment in Black film and TV this month

PILOT MOVIE *DEVOTION* HAS A MAVERICK OF ITS OWN

I LOVED WATCHING *Top Gun: Maverick*. Its incredible aerial sequences had me on the edge of my seat, and as Captain Pete 'Maverick' Mitchell, Tom Cruise continues to prove his worth as a singular action movie star. But while this thrilling sequel at least has a more diverse cast than the original film from 1986, there's a notable comparison to be made between the supporting roles assigned to Bashir Salahuddin, Jay Ellis, Greg Davis and Charles Parnell, and the framing of Jonathan Majors' character in another upcoming pilot movie, *Devotion*.

The launch of *Devotion*'s first trailer in the wake of *Top Gun: Maverick* feels significant. Based on the book of the same name by Adam Makos, this action war drama, based on true events, stars Majors as Jesse L. Brown, a pioneering Black fighter pilot who flew during the Korean War. The determination that it took for Brown to overcome systemic racism and become the first Black man in his field to complete the U.S. Navy's flight training programme, earning the respect of his peers, will doubtless be a major part of the reality the film aims to retell.

Brown's journey will be made that much more powerful for the fact that Majors is the actor who has been tasked with bringing him to life.

Jonathan Majors as real-life hero and flying ace Jesse L. Brown, risking life and limb completing numerous missions during the Korean War.

The *Loki* and *The Harder They Fall* actor has built quite the portfolio over the last few years, excelling at exposing the vulnerable interiors of the outwardly stoic characters he tends to portray. We get a taste of this in the film's trailer, which sees Brown try to motivate himself by looking in the mirror and repeating the insults he's had to endure his whole life.

Devotion shares more DNA with *Top Gun: Maverick* than just aerial wizardry. Glen Powell was a star in his own right as Hangman in the latter film, and he'll be taking to the skies once again as Tom Hudner, a fellow Naval aviator with whom Brown develops a deep friendship. This is no mere white-sidekick role, nor is Hudner a white saviour: the bond between the two men will be a backbone of the film and be critical to both characters' evolution.

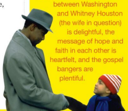
All signs point to a brilliant character study, bolstered by a brilliant performer, alongside aerial dogfights that may even give *Top Gun* a run for its money. Here's hoping it takes our breath away.

CLASSIC PICK OF THE MONTH

THE PREACHER'S WIFE

(1996)

The very first Denzel Washington film I ever watched saw the GOAT cast as Dudley, an angel sent from heaven. The chemistry between Washington and Whitney Houston (the wife in question) is delightful, the message of hope and faith in each other is heartfelt, and the gospel bangers are plentiful.



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JOHN CHO

ILLUSTRATION **ARNO**

When in your life were you most starstruck?
The one that jumps to mind is when I met John Lithgow in a hotel lobby. I think he's tremendous. This is going to make me sound self-serving, but he paid me a compliment, which is probably why I remember. He said, "Young man, I saw you on television last night and you were very good." You can dine out on that for decades. And I will.

Which film have you seen more than any other?
GoodFellas. There's always something funny, terrible or exciting happening in every single second of that movie, so if you catch it at any point you're pretty much stuck watching to the end. Breaking news: it's a really good film.

How much is a pint of milk?
Are we talking fancy-fancy or regular? I'll guess $2.50. Let me say, we're not a milk household. We're Asian. We're lactose intolerant. There is cultural bias in this question. How much is a 5lb bag of rice? Answer me that.

Who is the most famous person you could text right now?
Chris Pine is pretty famous, right? I could text him.

What is the worst smell in the world?
Other people's faeces. The concert porta-potty. That's the worst. Not mine, though. Mine smells great.

When did you last walk out of a movie?
I am prone to walking out of movies, although I can't think when I did it last. I can tell you the last time I gave up on a movie, but it wasn't in a theatre. I was watching *Against All Odds*, with Jeff Bridges and James Woods. The premise was so insane. James Woods' lady goes missing and he hires Jeff Bridges, a professional football player, to act as his detective. It was so ridiculous. The suspension of disbelief was not there. I might go back. I'm not a quitter.

When were you last naked outdoors?
I don't remember the last time, but I remember the *first* time. I would have been about five or six and I was locked out of my house naked as a punishment. By my mother. And there's been no psychological trauma about it, of course. I have completely forgotten it...

What is the worst thing you've ever put in your mouth?
My wife likes to make me confirm if something is rotten. I don't know why, but I love her and so I have eaten many, many rotten things just to prove to her that she's right.

COMING SOON

THE AFTERPARTY: SEASON 2
(TBC)
Cho boards Season 2 of Christopher Miller's murder-mystery show, joining new cast including Jack Whitehall and Ken Jeong. This second season will focus on a murder committed at a wedding.

UNTITLED STAR TREK SEQUEL
(TBC)
The fourth in the rebooted *Star Trek* movie franchise is believed to see Cho return as Sulu. Filming is due to start later this year under *WandaVision* director Matt Shakman.

What one thing do you do better than anyone else you know?
Guess the weight of dogs. I recently guessed a 120-pounder dead on.

What is your earliest memory?
I was four or something. I was born in Korea and I remember my father coming home from a trip to America. I recall being confused by who this man was because he'd been gone so long. He'd been away the better part of a year.

What's the best thing you've ever taken from a hotel?
This will sound douchey. At the end of a press junket you're always very, very tired and they'll send you a car to take you home. I'll always take a cold beer from the mini bar and drink it in the car on the way home. That is a sublime feeling. Put that all behind me, have a cold beer and not drive.

As a child, whose poster did you have on your wall?
Something from U2's *Joshua Tree* tour. Big fan.

Do you have a signature dish?
I only cook out of necessity. I have kids, and once in a while, when everyone is completely tired of all options and the go-to orders have been exhausted, I'll make what I call 'Daddy's Famous Chicken'. It is cubed chicken with soy sauce, onions, garlic, rice vinegar and whatever I want. I call it famous and the kids have accepted it is famous. **OLLY RICHARDS**

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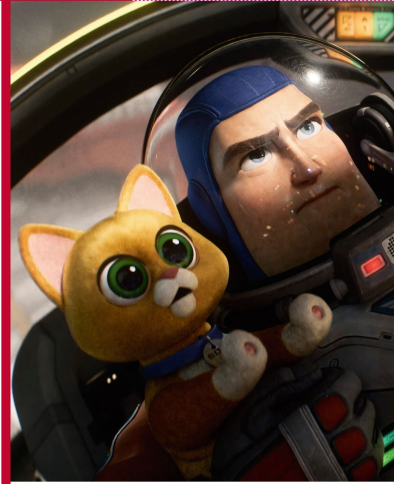


[FILM]

LIGHTYEAR

★★★

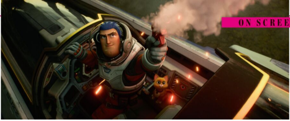
OUT **NOW**
CERT **PG** / **107 MINS**

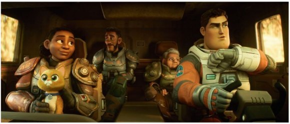
DIRECTOR Angus MacLane
CAST (VOICES) Chris Evans, Keke Palmer, Taika Waititi, Dale Soules, Peter Sohn, Uzo Aduba

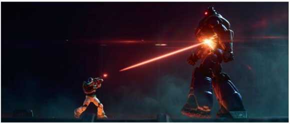
PLOT Exploring a new planet goes very wrong when cocky astronaut Buzz Lightyear (Evans) and fellow space commander Alisha Hawthorne (Aduba) crash their ship, marooning them and hundreds of others. Plagued by guilt, Buzz sets about trying to find a way to get the crew home and finish the mission.

LIGHTYEAR, AND ITS connection to the world of *Toy Story*, sparked confusion the moment it was announced. Is it a spin-off, completely separate from the 1995 film? Is it based on a real-life astronaut in the *Toy Story* universe, meaning Andy, Woody and the like live in a time where we've achieved intergalactic space travel? Thankfully, the film clears all of this up with an introductory title card, explaining that in 1995, a boy called Andy got a toy which was inspired by a movie. *Lightyear* is that movie.

Its relation to *Toy Story* aside, *Lightyear* is a fun, frenetic experience. It wastes no time plunging you into the mayhem of alien fights, spaceship flights and robot-cat delights, and barely lets up for a second. While this does give the film propulsion, it also makes it feel extremely chaotic. There's simultaneously too much plot (endless outlines of what steps the characters need to take next) and yet not enough (several elements are hand-waved, or depicted in







Clockwise from left: Buzz Lightyear and robot 'personal companion' Sox; Engaging the flare gun; Determined to complete their mission; Lightyear and Zurg face off.

too convenient a way to feel believable). Zero time is taken to provide context as to the world Buzz and his crew come from, which is also the one he's trying to get them back to — returning home and 'finishing the mission' is Buzz's singular motivation throughout the entire film, but we're never given any indication of what's waiting for him and the rest of the crew if they get there. And, as we get into the timey-wimey effects of Buzz's test flights, some of the movie's most significant character beats are glossed over in a mega-montage, reducing the massive upheaval they would cause in Buzz's life to virtually nothing. The titular astronaut may be in search of hyperspeed, but the film around him needs to take a moment to breathe every now and then.

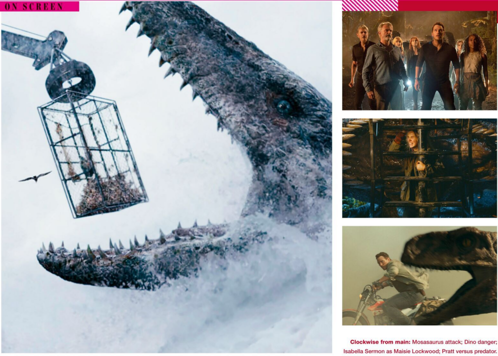
The animation is beautiful, though, with just about everything you'd hope for from a movie where Pixar heads to the cosmos. Landscapes are doused in golden sunsets, the pitch-black backdrop of deep space feels like it would swallow you whole, and the moment Buzz achieves hyperspeed is brilliantly climactic. There are times where the grey-brown tones of metal ships and the muddy planet become a little dull, but there's an inherent pleasure in seeing Buzz's iconic white, purple and green suit brought to life.

Unsurprisingly, Chris Evans voices a hero just as well as he depicts one in live action, and his new crew of Izzy, Mo and Darby are brought to life with vigour, humour and humanity by Keke Palmer, Taika Waititi and Dale Soules respectively. Speaking of humour, the gag-rate here is high, one-liners flying off the screen at a pace that feels different from Pixar's usual warm-hearted, more integrated comedic style. The star of the show is, without a doubt, Peter Sohn's Sox, Buzz's 'Personal Companion Robot', assigned to him by close friend and senior Space Commander Alisha Hawthorne (Uzo Aduba). Sox is an adorable, quick-witted genius (bafflingly, a pivotal plot discovery is made by said robot cat, and not the hundreds of humans supposedly working on the same thing), and Sohn's deadpan delivery is excellent. Plus, he spins his head round and says "meow meow meow" a lot. In fact, one wonders why *Toy Story*'s Andy would pine for a Buzz doll when Sox is *right there*.

If Sox is Buzz's C-3PO, Emperor Zurg (James Brolin) is his Darth Vader. His presence is heard and felt before he's seen, but the use of him as a villain doesn't fully land. The script works hard to give Zurg an identity that feels part of the story, as well as making him a fearsome antagonist, but his motivations never seem aligned to his actions, and he's the film's most forgettable element.

While that title card provides somewhat of an answer as to how *Lightyear* fits in with Pixar's pioneering original animation, it doesn't necessarily justify its existence. There's certainly some enjoyment to be had here, but the film is weighed down by genericness, coming up extremely short in comparison to fully original, specific-yet-universal Pixar output such as *Turning Red*, *Coco* or *Inside Out*. Though the underlying themes of teamwork, family and leadership are nicely played, they're also fairly surface-level — never quite reaching the heights of infinity, nor beyond. **SOPHIE BUTCHER**

VERDICT **Despite its messy plot and underwhelming villain, the strong voice performances and stunning visuals — and, of course, Sox the cat — make *Lightyear* a solid space adventure.**



Clockwise from main: Mosasaurus attack; Dino danger; Isabella Sermon as Maisie Lockwood; Pratt versus predator.

[FILM]

JURASSIC WORLD DOMINION

★★★

OUT **NOW**
CERT **12A** / **147 MINS**

DIRECTOR Colin Trevorrow
CAST Chris Pratt, Bryce Dallas Howard, Laura Dern, Sam Neill, Jeff Goldblum, BD Wong, Mamoudou Athie, Dichen Lachman, DeWanda Wise

PLOT Ex-Jurassic World workers Owen Grady (Pratt) and Claire Dearing (Howard) search for their adopted clone daughter Maisie (Sermon) and velociraptor Blue's baby, both kidnapped by poachers plying the illegal dinosaur trade. Meanwhile, palaeobotanist Ellie Sattler (Dern) recruits old friend Alan Grant (Neill) to infiltrate the shady goings on at genetics company Biosyn.

AT THE END of J.A. Bayona's *Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom*, dinosaurs and humans start living side by side. While this sadly doesn't mean velociraptors are now Uber drivers (always give them five stars) or stegosauruses have decent jobs in IT, it does offer a mouth-watering premise for *Jurassic World Dominion* to explore: two species separated by 65 million years forced to rub along together with no electric fences or Bob Peck to contain the carnage. It's an idea that Colin Trevorrow's franchise finale ultimately ignores, choosing to once again hem in its characters in confined studio-bound forests and dark corridors. It's a messy, overstuffed affair but delivers dollops of dino goodness, elevated by the return of franchise holy trinity Sam Neill, Laura Dern and Jeff Goldblum.

If Spielberg's original is about the beauty of the slow burn, *Dominion* starts at full pelt, throwing in sea-bound mayhem, a dinosaur rescue and a Wild West-style cattle drive, only with parasaurolophuses. Two plot lines emerge — one a dive into the illicit dinosaur black market, the other an almost secret-agent story involving genetically modified prehistoric locusts — unified by the corporation Biosyn founded by Lewis Dodgson (Campbell Scott) of "Dodgson! It's Dodgson!" first-film fame. You should never trust a company with 'sin' baked into the name.

Dotted throughout are fillips of great action scenes, from a thrilling foot-chase and a motorbike pursuit in Malta, to a winged serpent taking down an aircraft and a feathered dinosaur (finally) slithering under ice. The best of the bunch is a quieter, more suspenseful sequence as Claire (Bryce Dallas Howard) takes refuge underwater with a huge beastie stalking above. But the film is at its best when focused on its original trio. It's lovely to see Dern, Neill and Goldblum sharing the same frame, the dynamic of the serious scientists exasperated by the rock-star chaotician still gloriously intact. Goldblum in particular adds swagger and levity to a film in danger of becoming po-faced (it's a great touch that Malcolm slid into Ellie's DMs in the intervening years — of course he did). It also provides a sharp contrast to the relatively colourless heroes of the later trilogy, Chris Pratt seemingly leaking charisma from film to film and Howard bereft of a character trait you can grasp onto (at least the running in high heels was a thing).

Too many characters hinder investment, an over-abundance of critters (the CG ones look better than the animatronics) dilute the power of a singular Big Bad and the speechifying is occasionally cackhanded, making you pine for the elegant exposition of Mr. DNA. Some of the callbacks are clumsily handled — an iconic Laura Dern moment is squandered early — while some deliver exactly the right frisson; the distinctive sound of dilophosauruses filling a night sky is thrilling. "It never gets old," says Sattler about the joys of studying dinosaurs but what's absent here is the series' staple of wonder and awe. If we are living in a *Jurassic* world where dinosaurs are presented as that workaday, now might be the time to stop.

IAN FREER

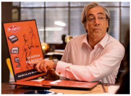
VERDICT **If it doesn't hit the *Top Gun: Maverick* heights of legacy sequels, *Jurassic World Dominion* is scattershot but entertaining, with fun, familiar set-pieces. Come for the delight in seeing Neill, Dern and Goldblum together again; stay for when the bloke on a scooter gets eaten.**

HUSTLE

★★★

OUT **NOW (NETFLIX)** / CERT **15** / **117 MINS**
DIRECTOR Jeremiah Zagar
CAST Adam Sandler, Ben Foster, Robert Duvall, Juancho Hernangómez

It's surprising that it's taken basketball superfan Adam Sandler this long to bleed that passion into his films. *Hustle* sees him play Philadelphia 76ers scout Stanley Sugerman, who thinks he's found the next big star in Bo Cruz (real-life NBA player Juancho Hernangómez), a streetball phenom from Spain. All the standard sports-drama tropes are dutifully checked off in Taylor Materne and Will Fetters' screenplay, but director Jeremiah Zagar executes the familiar game plan well and the many stylistic flourishes add welcome spice. Sandler is also ably supported by Hernangómez, an unsurprisingly huge presence on the court, while also nailing Cruz's naive vulnerability when the focus switches from basketball to family. **AW**

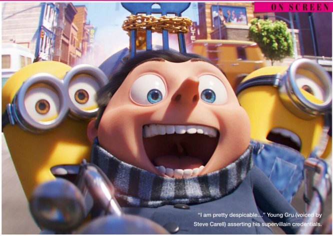


THE GOOD BOSS

★★★

OUT **15 JULY** / CERT **TBC** / **120 MINS**
DIRECTOR Fernando León de Aranoa
CAST Javier Bardem, Manolo Solo, Almudena Amor

A small Spanish factory becomes a microcosm for the modern scourge of greed and corruption in Fernando León de Aranoa's darkly humorous satire. That the factory in question manufactures weighing scales is a metaphor wrung dry by the screenplay, which is concerned with the delicate balances of power — class, race, gender — on which the company (and society) is built. Much of the film hinges on Javier Bardem's exceptional performance as factory boss Blanco, a character who is willing to do anything to preserve his reputation. And even if the camera, and the film as a whole, sidelines its less privileged characters 'in favour of Bardem's snakelike manager, it is compelling as a portrait of monstrous inequality. **NB**



"I am pretty despicable..." Young Gru (voiced by Steve Carell) asserting his supervillain credentials.

[FILM]

MINIONS: THE RISE OF GRU

★★★

OUT **NOW**
CERT **U** / **87 MINS**

DIRECTOR Kyle Balda
CAST (VOICES) Steve Carell, Pierre Coffin, Taraji P. Henson, Michelle Yeoh, Jean-Claude Van Damme

PLOT Young Gru (Carell) wants to be a supervillain and doesn't want to wait until he's an adult. After unsuccessfully trying to join his favourite super-villain team, the Vicious 6, Gru decides to show them just how bad he can be, putting himself, his Minions and the entire world in danger.

NOW THAT WE'RE five instalments into what we must only apologetically call The Cinematic Gruniverse, a simple formula has been established for any films involving Gru/the Minions. A powerful doohickie will be stolen. At least one Minion or child will go missing. There will be several montages. There will eventually be a battle with something very big. The Minions will save the day by accident. That predictable formula is a bad thing if you're ever hoping one of these movies will do something unexpected, but is anyone honestly coming to the Minions expecting innovation? That simple formula has repeatedly led to a reliable, undemanding good time at the cinema. And so it proves again.

Calling this the second Minions movie is somewhat deceptive and presumably down to the fact that the little yellow weirdos now have stronger brand recognition than *Despicable Me*. This is a *Despicable Me* prequel, centred on Gru, with a heavier than usual sprinkling of Minions. In 1976 San Francisco, Gru (Steve Carell) is an awkward, friendless pre-teen who dreams of being a supervillain. He applies to join the world's premier supervillain team, the Vicious 6, led by Belle Bottom (Taraji P. Henson), but is humiliated in his interview. To show his heroes what they're missing, Gru steals the mysterious Zodiac Stone, the Vicious 6's most treasured loot. He and his loyal Minions find themselves on the run from the most dangerous people in the world, seeking the help of someone with his own grudge against the Vicious 6: their betrayed former leader, Wild Knuckles (Alan Arkin).

Structurally, it's overly busy, splitting up its characters so we have Gru and Knuckles bonding, three Minions learning kung fu with an acupuncturist (Michelle Yeoh) for spurious reasons, another Minion going cross country on a treasure hunt, and the Vicious 6 plotting their revenge. Thankfully, each subplot is simple enough that it never gets confusingly tangled. All the strands eventually come together in a final act that arrives with scant explanation and makes little sense, but it's gorgeously animated and not short on spectacle.

If plot has never been a particular strong point of these movies, they've always been very good at silly incidental jokes. There are some terrific throwaway gags here, not least in the names of members of the Vicious 6: an evil Viking is known as Svengeance (Dolph Lundgren); Nun Chuck (Lucy Lawless) is a spooky nun who splits her crucifix into weapons; and Jean-Claude Van Damme voices a lobster-limbed baddie called Jean Clawed. Kyle Balda, director of the first *Minions* and *Despicable Me 3*, has a lot of fun with the film's 1970s setting, from towering hairdos to a disco soundtrack, evil lairs and Roger Moore-era Bond aesthetic vehicles.

This is straightforward, uncomplicated fun. It's unlikely to win over anyone unmoved by the previous films, but precisely what you're looking for if you've enjoyed spending time in the Gruniverse thus far. **OLLY RICHARDS**

VERDICT **Like the Minions, this instalment is barely distinguishable from the others, but it's easy to be won over by the sheer nutty joy and enthusiasm.**

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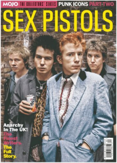
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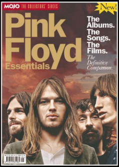
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EXPLORER

★★★★

OUT **14 JULY** / CERT **TBC** / **113 MINS**

DIRECTOR Matthew Dyas

PARTICIPANTS Ranulph Fiennes, Anton Bowring

Matthew Dyas' film about World's Greatest Explorer™ Ranulph Twisleton-Wykeham-Fiennes has the madness of a non-fiction *Fitzcarraldo*. Mostly employing archive footage and disembodied voices, no talking heads, Dyas charts Fiennes' extraordinary exploits in broad strokes, but this isn't the stuff that sticks with you. Instead, it's the 'smaller' stories — his 48-year relationship with childhood sweetheart Ginny ("the only topic that makes me emotional") or driving to personal appearances in a scratched-up car to make a living — that resonate. There's little in the way of probing analysis (someone mentions "White privilege folly"), but it emerges as a moving, entertaining portrait of a true eccentric. **IF**

THE RAILWAY CHILDREN RETURN

★★★

OUT **15 JULY** / CERT **PG** / **98 MINS**

DIRECTOR Morgan Matthews

CAST Sheridan Smith, Jenny Agutter, Tom Courtenay, Beau Gadson, Kenneth Aikens

1970's *The Railway Children* is 'Tea & Crumpets: The Movie'. The presence of OG Railway Child Jenny Agutter reprising her role in this tougher but still kid-friendly re-spin suggests this is a legacy sequel, but while the movie embraces ideas and motifs from the first film, it mostly does its own thing. The film's smartest decision is to locate the action around the evacuation of children from major cities during World War II. The first half-hour is a likeable set of hi-jinx; things get more dramatic when the gang discovers injured African-American GI, Abe (Kenneth Aikens). Some of it is too on the nose, and it's perhaps not as heart-warming as the first film, but it's engaging and entertaining in different ways, winningly played by its fresh cast. **IF**

Taking a trip: Rayan Sarlak as the little brother in the family.

[FILM]

HIT THE ROAD

★★★★

OUT **29 JULY**
CERT **12A** / **94 MINS**

DIRECTOR Panah Panahi

CAST Pantea Panahiha, Hasan Majuni, Rayan Sarlak, Amin Simiar

PLOT An Iranian family embarks on a road trip across their country. The reasons for the trip are mysterious. Mother (Panahiha) and father (Majuni) suggest to their younger son (Sarlak) that his older brother (Simiar) is getting married — but there are bigger secrets not being told.

EARLY ON IN *Hit The Road*, the family tries to have a "last-gasp party" in their car, with singing and dancing. The hyperactive younger brother — brilliantly played by tiny newcomer Rayan Sarlak — perceptively picks up on this phrase. "In movies, when they say 'last-gasp', something bad happens," he says. His mother tries to reassure him. But *Hit The Road* is all about last-gasps: the family are on what appears to be a quietly desperate journey, a dash for the border of Iran, a guarded implication of the refugee experience. "Last-gasp party", then, is a phrase that seems to hit the tone of this strangely sad, gently elegiac, off-guardedly funny film.

This is a hell of a debut from director Panah Panahi, and it's hard not to read into the real-life circumstances of his life: his father is acclaimed filmmaker Jafar Panahi, who won the Cannes Caméra d'Or in 1995 for *The White Balloon*, and had his 2011 documentary *This Is Not A Film* smuggled out of the country on a USB drive hidden in a cake, while under house arrest. He comes not just from a proud filmmaking lineage, but a family forced to confront an oppressive, illiberal regime.

Why this particular fictional family take this road trip is something never explicitly revealed, but we can surmise plenty, in small, fraught moments — a SIM card being destroyed, a car seemingly on their tail. There's danger and stress lurking everywhere, but the mood is kept largely light, the older characters keen to protect the innocence of the younger son; beautifully pitched performances from Iranian veterans Pantea Panahiha and Hasan Majuni, as the parents, switch fluidly from wit to whispered worry.

That tragi-comic tone is juggled skilfully, especially with the younger son's restless energy (there is, for example, an out-of-nowhere reference to *Batman Begins*). It has the desert-dry wit of Middle Eastern filmmakers like Abbas Kiarostami or Elia Suleiman, the comedy revealing layers of lived-in family dynamics: the son calls his mother "dear lady", the father calls the son "little fart". They bicker affectionately, and sing sad, aching pre-Revolution songs about love and longing.

It's a strangely romantic experience. Iran's rugged, dramatic landscape flashes past the car windows, flush with poetic visual flourishes — a peloton of cyclists whizzing in the background of a reflective conversation; a red disposable chair being dragged through a field of wheat by a sickly dog. One key climactic scene is played entirely in an extreme wide shot, the family silhouetted on a far horizon. Panahi's camera is tender and empathetic, but keeps its distance too, maintaining an enigmatic quality that feels in keeping with a family full of secrets.

The final act somewhat loses some of that early energetic charge, when the family reaches the border and their story finds a more melodramatic end — but it never loses focus on its characters, or what they must endure. A deeply stirring final shot completes the effect. Hell of a last gasp. **JOHN NUGENT**

VERDICT **Equal doses of heartache and humour make this a potent, bittersweet take on the refugee experience, immediately announcing director Panah Panahi as a significant voice on the cinematic stage.**

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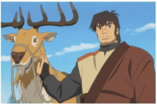


THE DEER KING

★★★★

OUT **27 JULY** / CERT **15** / **114 MINS**

DIRECTORS Masashi Ando, Masayuki Miyaji

CAST (VOICES) Shinichi Tsutsumi, Ryoma Takeuchi, Hisui Kimura

Sprawling in its scope but intimate at its core, *The Deer King* is a lush animation that builds a rich fantasy out of simple details, rewarding viewers with an emotional story and intricately constructed world. Directed by former Ghibli staff Masashi Ando and Masayuki Miyaji, it follows gruff warrior Van (Shinichi Tsutsumi), raising an orphan in the wild in the wake of a destructive virus. The film balances the thrill of exploring its world — filled with fascinating spirituality, cursed viral infections and quite dull bureaucracy — with keeping focus on the parental relationship at its heart. Consistently glimmering in sunlight, this animation illuminates the powerful rhythms of human and environmental bonds, whilst petty politics fizzle in the background. *The Deer King* is one to fawn over. **JC**

THE PRINCESS

★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **12A** / **106 MINS**

DIRECTOR Ed Perkins

PARTICIPANTS Princess Diana, Prince Charles, Queen Elizabeth II

Lady Diana Spencer was the most photographed woman in the world — the team behind *The Princess* attempt to embrace this and turn it into a positive, for this woman whose life was controlled and ultimately ruined by the media. But the result of this archival film — starting in the early days of courting Prince Charles through to the end of Diana's life — is queasy and hypocritical: by stressing just how much the world looked at her, so often without her permission, it's simply a rehash of the tragic journey that led to her untimely death. Despite the impressive feat of editing, there is no revelation here, just the same old perspective of a global audience perversely trying to connect with someone who simply wanted to be left alone. **EK**

SHE WILL

★★★★

OUT **22 JULY** / CERT **15** / **96 MINS**

DIRECTOR Charlotte Colbert

CAST Alice Krige, Kota Eberhardt, Rupert Everett

After a double mastectomy, demanding diva Veronica Ghent (Alice Krige) travels with her nurse (Kota Eberhardt) to a Gothic retreat in the Scottish Highlands. As Veronica tries to avoid the other residents, including Rupert Everett's flamboyant artist, Charlotte Colbert's darkly witty horror layers the premise with ideas around female ageing, witchcraft lore and child abuse, all in service of a #MeToo vengeance parable. It shares DNA with other recent flicks (*Amulet*, *Saint Maud*) and often feels like a litany of horror-film tropes (telekinesis, levitation). Still, Colbert creates unsettling imagery (malevolent mud!) and stetches of intense mood (amplified by a great Clint Mansell score), all anchored by strong performances from Krige and newcomer Eberhardt, who gradually create an affecting bond of sisterhood. **IF**

KURT VONNEGUT: UNSTUCK IN TIME

★★★★

OUT **22 JULY** / CERT **NOT RATED** / **127 MINS**

DIRECTORS Robert B. Weide, Don Argott

PARTICIPANTS Kurt Vonnegut, Robert B. Weide

Kurt Vonnegut: Unstuck In Time is two things at once: both a biography of the zeitgeisty counter-culture author and a portrait of director Robert B. Weide's 40-year mission to get this documentary made. The first strand paints a colourful, revealing, frequently funny portrait of key moment's in Vonnegut's life, from surviving the bombing of Dresden to the death of his sister Ally to becoming the voice of a generation with works like *Slaughterhouse 5* and *Breakfast Of Champions*. The lesser strand, Weide's relationship with Vonnegut, is sweetly etched, but detracts from a more incisive critical portrait. Still, Vonnegut is great fun, and *Unstuck In Time* does what all good author documentaries should do: make you want to check out the books immediately. **IF**

ITHAKA

★★★

OUT **8 JULY** / CERT **TBC** / **115 MINS**

DIRECTOR Ben Lawrence

PARTICIPANTS John Shipton, Stella Moris, John Pilger

This near-two-hour documentary fills in the gaps since Julian Assange's 2019 incarceration at Belmarsh Prison, with the help of the people closest to him. Writer-director Ben Lawrence follows the efforts of the Wikileaks founder's once-estranged father, John Shipton, and his fiancée and lawyer, Stella Moris, over two years as they travel the world to garner support from politicians, diplomats, journalists and activists to prevent his extradition to the US, and stage a campaign for his freedom. It doesn't offer a complete portrait of Assange, but provides a grounded, humanising perspective on a controversial figure, press freedom and mental health, with Brian Eno's score offering a hint of cinematic flair in a decidedly un-Hollywood story. **HF**

DON'T MAKE ME GO

★★★

OUT **15 JULY (PRIME VIDEO)** / CERT **TBC** / **109 MINS**

DIRECTOR Hannah Marks

CAST John Cho, Mia Isaac, Kaya Scodelario

When single father Max (John Cho) is diagnosed with a seemingly inoperable cancer, he makes a decision to spend the last year of his life ensuring his teenage daughter Wally (Mia Isaac) has everything she needs for the future — including a reunion with her estranged mother. The pair then embark on a road trip to find her, and it's filled with touching, relatable moments that are genuinely moving to watch. At the start of the film, Wally (who also narrates) tells us we're "not going to like the ending", but we'll "like the story. As such, the film's bizarre denouement is a clumsy misstep, souring the tale we've happily invested in for the previous 90 minutes for the sake of some very poorly judged shock value. **EA**

En route to Spiderhead, about as pleasant a place as its name suggests.

[FILM]

SPIDERHEAD

★★★

OUT **NOW (NETFLIX)**
CERT **15** / **107 MINS**

DIRECTOR Joseph Kosinski
CAST Chris Hemsworth, Miles Teller, Jurnee Smollett, Charles Parnell

PLOT In a remote location, a prison houses convicts who have committed terrible crimes. But it's also a futuristic research laboratory where inmates, including Jeff (Teller), are experimented on by the resident scientific genius, Abnesti (Hemsworth).

THE PECULIARLY TITLED *Spiderhead* arrives on Netflix with about as little fanfare as a film starring an Avenger, written by the duo behind *Deadpool*, and directed by the man behind the summer's most beloved blockbuster could possibly garner. This seems even more surprising upon watching the opening minutes, in which Joseph Kosinski draws on his *Top Gun: Maverick* box of tricks to deploy striking shots of a Cessna voyaging through azure skies (co-lead Miles Teller is another *Maverick* link). But once that seaplane parks, it's clear that this is a very different proposition to that high-altitude, fist-pumping action flick. A claustrophobic, headfucky thriller about mysterious experiments, *Spiderhead* is set almost entirely in just two rooms. No need for speed here — but while it's admirable that Kosinski and his cast are trying something new, this experiment is only partially successful.

The source material is a *New Yorker* short story, *Escape From Spiderhead*, a chilly sliver of science-fiction by George Saunders. In it, Saunders paints an Orwellian picture of prisoners experimented on by an amiable but dark-intentioned warden: activating drugs via remote control, he can manipulate their emotions and even their thoughts. In expanding the tale into a feature film, Kosinski has had fun creating a chicly nightmarish penitentiary, all sleek surfaces, communal coffee pots and rooms with hellish secrets (in case you're wondering why it's called *Spiderhead*, well, the building has eight wings, with the nerve-centre being the top one). While it's hardly a visual feast, there are smart little design flourishes, like the colour-coded vials that click into Apple-esque 'MobiPaks' on the patients' backs.

Cast-wise, while Teller delivers a solid performance as the prisoner at the heart of the story (there are so many flashbacks to the car accident that saw him incarcerated that it starts to feel like padding), the main event is Chris Hemsworth going full mad scientist. Having almost as much fun as Oscar Isaac did in *Ex Machina*, and even getting a similar dance routine, Hemsworth is the most immaculately groomed Bond villain ever, a bespectacled pharmaceutical bro who says things like, "Pressure forms diamonds," when he's not performing heinous experiments on his captives. While he's fun, the character never musters up much menace, an issue given that this is positioned as a taut two-hander. As Spiderhead's chief arachnid, he's a bit of a let-down.

It's refreshing to get a sci-fi film that dials down the 'fi' while going big on the 'sci'. There's almost no action here (when some does arrive in the third act, it feels extraneous), with Kosinski trusting in his small ensemble of actors to deliver thrills with their jargon-heavy dialogue alone. That tactic mostly comes off — fans of *Black Mirror* will likely enjoy the snaky, jet-black plot. That said, how much you're entertained by it may be in direct proportion to your tolerance for hearing Chris Hemsworth say the word 'Darkenfloxx' — it has to be in the double-digits, at least. **NICK DE SEMLYEN**

VERDICT **Some summer anti-programming arrives in the form of a highly talky, at times upsetting prison drama — think *Fortress* meets *Limitless*. You can feel the strain of its expansion from novella form, but it's just about worth a visit.**

DONNA

★★★★

OUT **15 JULY** / CERT **TBC** / **75 MINS**
DIRECTOR Jay Bedwani
PARTICIPANTS Donna Personna, Gloria Villareal

Jay Bedwani's documentary about Donna Personna, a woman who does a lip-syncing act in San Francisco, sets a gold standard for trans* representation. The film nimbly paints a contemporary portrait of Donna, now in her seventies, as she writes a play about the 1966 Compton's Cafeteria riot. It also covers the history of her family life, culminating in a reunion with her estranged sister, Gloria. Bedwani moves between these narrative strands with precision, always deeply respectful of his subject. Raised a Baptist in San Jose, Donna repressed her female identity until her sixties, when the queer community offered her a new lease of life. As such, *Donna* is truly a celebration of embracing your authentic self. **LC**

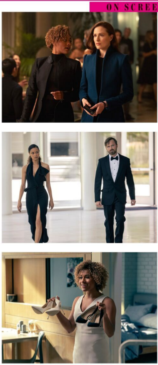
McENROE

★★★

OUT **15 JULY** / CERT **TBC** / **103 MINS**
DIRECTOR Barney Douglas
PARTICIPANTS John McEnroe, Billie Jean King, Björn Borg

An entertaining if familiar portrait of tennis' rock god, enlivened by great access to its star, hampered by suspect filmmaking decisions. The first half charts McEnroe's rise — the temper tantrums, the rivalry with Björn Borg, the partying at Studio 54 — followed by the drug-influenced decline, including a rare look at his failed marriage with Tatum O'Neal. Yet the story is dissipated by director Barney Douglas' linking device of McEnroe wandering New York at night, randomly answering pay-phones, and cheap animation designed to put you inside his synapses. The talking heads (Borg, Billie Jean King) reveal little and the film doesn't really uncover the Superbrat's demons. Still, McEnroe is great company and the tennis remains sublime. **IF**

Back in black: Ed Harris.


Top to bottom: Ariana DeBose and Evan Rachel Wood; Thandiwe Newton and Aaron Paul; Goody two-shoes?

[TV]

WESTWORLD: SEASON 4

★★★★

OUT **NOW**
EPISODES SEEN **4 OF 8**

SHOWRUNNERS Lisa Joy, Jonathan Nolan
CAST Thandiwe Newton, Aaron Paul, Evan Rachel Wood, Ed Harris, Jeffrey Wright, Tessa Thompson

PLOT Seven years after the fall of Rehoboam, Caleb (Paul) is living happily with a wife and daughter, Maeve (Newton) is off the grid, and a familiar Man In Black (Harris) is alive and on the hunt. Meanwhile, Bernard (Wright) has seen the future, Hale (Thompson) is still Dolores (sort of), and Dolores (Wood) is now Christina. Got it?

IT IS A truth universally acknowledged that you can rarely have enough Ed Harris. *Westworld*'s slightly polarising third season, which dropped the rawhide and spurs for a glass-and-steel, Tesla-powered cityscape, upended the show in a number of ways, but the vastly reduced presence of Harris' scowling killer was a heavy blow. Lisa Joy and Jonathan Nolan lay their psycho stall out early in this latest instalment, though, which opens with Harris centre stage in a 'negotiation' that makes Don Corleone look like a contestant on *Dragons' Den*. Of course, it's unclear why any of this is taking place, how he's alive, or what in the great Sublime is actually going on at all, but that's to be expected — this is *Westworld*, after all.

After expanding its intricate puzzle box over the first two seasons, the show took a bold left turn with Season 3. Exploring life outside its eponymous theme park, the show toyed with the notion of what 'real' is (only slightly undercut by Alex Garland's *Devs*, which offered a competing, concurrent take on the same subject), but lost the park's compelling world-within-a-world mystery, relying instead on dense, labyrinthine plotting. Season 4 swirls the best parts of these flavours together, maintaining the *Black Mirror* future, while reviving the mystery element and keeping us perpetually off-balance by subverting expectations rather than elliptical storytelling.

With the board completely reset by a seven-year time jump, we are reintroduced to once familiar characters via a series of intertwining narratives. Maeve (Thandiwe Newton — the show's acid-tongued MVP) and Caleb (Aaron Paul) have been targeted by William (Harris), who is aggressively tying up loose ends while expanding his influence. Bernard (Jeffrey Wright) has spent years in the Sublime (Season 2's take on silicon heaven), emerging, Stephen Strange-like, with knowledge of all possible futures and on a mission to find the only 'variant' that leads to a positive outcome.

Meanwhile, Dolores (Evan Rachel Wood), who was deleted at the end of Season 3, is now a mousy, awkward woman named Christina, working as a writer of video-game NPCs (subtext alert!) and receiving threats from an unlisted number.

The mystery of quite what is going on in each of these strands unfolds slowly, meditating on the nature of self, while teasing enigmatic hints without ever courting frustration. Meanwhile, a return to familiar livery from earlier seasons (new park, new hosts, new anachronistic covers of chart-topping bops), combined with several whiplash-inducing rug-pulls, ensures viewers are wrong-footed and captivated in equal measure. Add to all that a thread of hard paranoia as (upgraded) hosts replace inconvenient humans, sinister flies herald death, and the early seasons' central conceit is artfully, chillingly inverted.

Meanwhile, this remains one of the most aesthetically dazzling shows on television — a vision of glossy skyscrapers, pristine interiors and immaculate costume-work. For anyone feeling fatigued by the LED-wall limitations of recent sci-fi output, *Westworld*'s expansive sets and glorious locations are a balm for the senses, just as its re-invigorated storytelling is one for the soul. **JAMES DYER**

VERDICT **Beautiful, baffling, and bonkers. A welcome resurgence for Joy and Nolan's box of violent delights, and one that firmly dispels any hint that *Westworld* might have gone south.**

Clockwise from main: Iman Vellani as Kamala Khan/Ms. Marvel; With Matthew Lintz as pal Bruno; Help for (super) heroes; Meet the parents.

[TV]

MS. MARVEL

★★★★

OUT **NOW (DISNEY+)**
EPISODES VIEWED **3 OF 6**

CREATOR Bisha K. Ali
CAST Iman Vellani, Matt Lintz, Yasmeen Fletcher, Zenobia Shroff, Mohan Kapur

PLOT High-schooler Kamala Khan's (Vellani) life is simple — playing video games, passing her driving test, obsessing over superheroes and crushing on cute boys. But her ordinary teenage existence is changed by a mysterious bangle which unlocks her own set of superpowers.

IN THE FIRST few minutes of *Ms. Marvel*, as unique animated scribbles flood the screen, imaginatively conveying the inner thoughts and feelings of Kamala Khan (an immediately charming Iman Vellani), you'll realise something: this has all the trappings of early-2000s-era teen TV. After some rather more grown-up entries in the Marvel Cinematic Universe of late, the latest small-screen MCU offering arrives like a colourful sledgehammer, functioning more as a fun and dreamy teenage comedy, wrapped up in a superhero spectacular. Less *Batman Begins*, more *Lizzie McGuire*, then — if Lizzie suddenly got glowing mystical powers, a Marvel-sized budget and appeal beyond the 12-to-18 age bracket.

Unlike *Moon Knight*, which kept its distance from the wider universe, *Ms. Marvel* wastes no time explaining how the events of the MCU have impacted Kamala's life. The series opens with a vibrant doodle montage recap of *Avengers: Endgame*, ostensibly animated by Kamala herself. As with *Hawkeye*'s Kate Bishop, who idolised Clint Barton, Kamala worships the very air that Captain Marvel swan-dived through to sucker-punch Thanos in the face; more than anything, Kamala desires to become like Carol Danvers. But before she tries to impossibly will herself into having superpowers, she must first try to conquer high school.

Like most teenagers, Kamala feels like she doesn't quite fit anywhere, a quirky teen who exists on the fringes of popular high-school society. What she lacks in understanding the more practical aspects of everyday life, she makes up for in passionate ideas about what type of person she wants to be, and how she fits into her world. This is a show that leans into its high-school setting: crushes, besties and hero-worshipping are Kamala's priorities.

That means *Ms. Marvel* is, it's fair to say, a relatively low-stakes affair across the opening two hours. The first episode largely focuses on Kamala working on a cosplay Captain Marvel outfit for an *Avengers*-themed fan convention, with the biggest threat only whether her traditional parents will allow her to attend — no apocalypse-level dangers just yet. However, even though the first two episodes lack punch, its third hour is quite the emotional bombshell.

Episode 3 manages to beautifully encapsulate the essence of the idea and get to the strife at the core of Kamala's heart, her relationship with her family but most importantly her mother (Zenobia Shroff). In one candid scene between Kamala and her mum, the teen learns that the bond between mothers and daughters "is [an] eternal struggle" in more ways than one. As her mother shares grievances about being abandoned by her own mum, Kamala must process how her decision to be a superhero might incur the same rift. With this episode, *Ms. Marvel* reveals itself as not just another same-y superhero origin story but instead an incisive examination of matriarchal inter-generational trauma. It's both cathartic and heart-wrenching.

Under the stewardship of creator Bisha K. Ali, a British-Pakistani comedian and writer who previously wrote on *Sex Education*, the show does a great job balancing the comedic and dramatic. There are witty visual gags, like a delightfully choreographed fight scene set to New Jersey band Bon Jovi's 'Livin' On A Prayer' — a favourite of Kamala's mum — and well-rounded, warmly funny, instantly likeable characters such as Kamala's perpetually broke, but extremely woke, brother Aamir (played with great comedic timing by Saagar Shaikh). The series also has an authentic take on Pakistani-American culture; one memorable montage explains the different cliques within the close-knit community, and the show takes admirable care in explaining the rituals and realities of life as a modern Muslim.

Sure, it's a show with a target audience: designed more to appeal to teenagers than adults. But for those who can roll with the punches of the awkward-but-relatable approach, there is much promise here. Kamala clearly has a bright future mapped out for her in the MCU — we have the delightful prospect of a meeting with Carol Danvers in next year's *The Marvels* — and these initial episodes are an encouraging start. **DESTINY JACKSON**

VERDICT **Starting frothy and fun, *Ms. Marvel* finds welcome emotional heft in Episode 3. Kamala Khan is a compelling and unique addition to the MCU.**

Lightsabers at dawn: Obi-Wan Kenobi (Ewan McGregor) and his fallen protégé (Hayden Christensen).

[TV]

OBI-WAN KENOBI

★★★★

OUT **NOW (DISNEY+)**
EPISODES VIEWED **6 OF 6**

SHOWRUNNER Joby Harold
CAST Ewan McGregor, Hayden Christensen, Moses Ingram, Joel Edgerton, Bonnie Piesse, Rupert Friend

PLOT Ten years after *Revenge Of The Sith*, Obi-Wan Kenobi (McGregor) is hiding in the Tatooine desert when Bail Organa (Jimmy Smits) calls on him to help young Leia (Vivien Lyra Blair). Can the former Jedi master help without revealing his presence to the Empire?

ONE OF THE disappointments of the *Star Wars* prequel trilogy was how little stylistic connective tissue it shared with the original films, given all those shiny surfaces and CG creatures. This show links the two sagas in style as well as substance, giving us an effective halfway point between *Revenge Of The Sith* and Luke Skywalker's rise to prominence, and a look into the missing decades of Obi-Wan Kenobi's life.

Obi-Wan is now cunningly disguised as 'Ben' Kenobi, a desert fishmonger who keeps his head down, and a distant eye on Luke Skywalker (Grant Feely), without the approval of the latter's uncle Owen (Joel Edgerton). Then Imperial Inquisitors turn up on Tatooine, looking for escaped Jedi.

There's an effectively nasty premise in the cat-and-mouse game between Inquisitors and Jedi here: Jedi can't help but help, so all the Inquisitors need do is threaten literally anyone, and nearby Jedi will feel compelled to intervene. It's a grubby, real-world totalitarian tactic designed to divide and intimidate, because if a Jedi like Obi-Wan looks away from such evil to keep himself safe, is he still a Jedi? Or has his very nature been corrupted? Such effective nastiness is amplified by gleeful sneering, in Rupert Friend's Grand Inquisitor, and single-minded obsession, in Moses Ingram's driven Reva. These are fresh bad guys to be reckoned with, and their story arcs manage some welcome surprises.

Against this backdrop, Obi-Wan receives a call for help from an old friend, and risks his hiding place to answer it. The job will bring him into contact with brave souls still fighting the Empire, and expose him to the unstoppable force that is Princess Leia (Vivien Lyra Blair), intimidating even as a tween. But it also puts him in the path of Darth Vader (Hayden Christensen) once more.

Showrunner Joby Harold and director Deborah Chow for the most part make a strong inter-quel chapter here, with a despairing, wary McGregor as the missing link between the two trilogies. They also create a world with both the dusty, used feel of the original trilogy and traces of the flat glitz of the prequels, and only a few niggling discontinuities with the canon. These adventures help to redeem not only McGregor's character but his entire under-loved era, cherry-picking the best bits and leaving aside the embarrassing Gungans and terrible screenwriting.

While the show can't make Anakin/Darth Vader's emotional life sing, there are some killer moments for Christensen to play here, and battles on alien worlds lit only by lightsabers. More crucially, it's a great pleasure to see an older, wiser McGregor back to face him. McGregor became more at ease with his character with each film of the prequels, and now these old robes seem entirely comfortable — even though, or perhaps because, Obi-Wan himself has never been more at sea. Still, over the series he recovers himself a little, and earns a new path for his life as a Jedi. He discovers, you might say, a new hope. **HELEN O'HARA**

VERDICT **Despite a few continuity blunders and over-familiar beats, this has a solid understanding of its hero and a fun new adventure. It's a very welcome return to form after the misfiring *Book Of Boba Fett*.**

"I like what you've done with the place": Pike (Anson Mount) surveys the Enterprise.

[TV]

STAR TREK: STRANGE NEW WORLDS

★★★

OUT **NOW (PARAMOUNT +)**
EPISODES VIEWED **3 OF 10**

SHOWRUNNERS Akiva Goldsman, Alex Kurtzman, Jenny Lumet
CAST Anson Mount, Ethan Peck, Jess Bush, Christina Chong, Celia Rose Gooding, Rebecca Romijn

PLOT Captain Pike (Mount) is brought out of his reclusion and back to the Enterprise. Along with officer Number One (Romijn) and Spock (Ethan Peck), his five-year mission to seek out new life and new civilisations continues.

FROM THE outset, the agenda is clear: Anson Mount intoning the famous "five-year mission" speech over Alexander Courage's classic *Star Trek* fanfare, followed by Jeff Russo's devoted homage to the original theme. Where *Discovery* disappeared hundreds of years into the future for its third season, and *Picard* went dystopian, *Star Trek: Strange New Worlds* is 'Nostalgia *Trek*': colourful, fun, and boldly going where everything's comfortably familiar. A prequel to a show from the 1960s, but also a spin-off from another 2020 prequel to the same series, *Strange New Worlds* beams in with a lot of baggage, but to its credit, you don't need a degree from Starfleet Academy to keep up.

These are the voyages of the starship Enterprise, specifically the version we encountered in *Discovery*, with some additional familiar faces (Jess Bush as an amusingly sadistic Nurse Chapel, Celia Rose Gooding as a confident Nyota Uhura) and some new characters (Christina Chong's prickly La'an Noonien Singh, Bruce Horak's blind Andorian engineer Hemmer). This is the Enterprise before Kirk, and nominally that of 1965 *Star Trek*'s unaired first pilot episode 'The Cage' (itself recycled as flashbacks in 1966 two-parter 'The Menagerie'). The latter, of course, gave us Pike's grim fate, which the Pike of *Strange New Worlds* is aware of, thanks to some *Discovery* foreshadowing. Haunted by the knowledge that he'll be burned and paralysed in a decade's time, we pick him up in Montana, grey and shaggy and less than inclined to return to work, until Starfleet calls him back to duty.

Deeper '60s cuts include Spock's fiancée T'Pring (Gia Sandu) — who hails from the 1967 episode 'Amok Time' — and Jim's brother Sam Kirk (Dan Jeannotte), who was played by Shatner himself in 'Operation — Annihilate!'. Also harking back to classic *Trek* is the return of a more episodic structure; there are linking threads, but these are largely standalone episodes, with rotating character focus. Episode 2 has strong Uhura energy, for example, and a lovely performance from Gooding, subtly evoking Nichelle Nichols while making the character her own.

Pike's first mission is to a planet that's developed warp technology too early. Episodes 2 and 3 involve, respectively, negotiations with an irritable alien species that worships a destructive comet, and the mystery of a missing colony of "augments", in which La'an's relationship to infamous villain Khan Noonien Singh is spelled out. But that third episode is also an everyone-on-the-Enterprise-goes-crazy story, which, along with the Prime Directive-focused first episode and alien-brinkmanship second, give the impression that, while visually striking and never less than engaging, *Strange New Worlds* is, so far, content to play the *Star Trek* hits. **OWEN WILLIAMS**

VERDICT **Comfort-blanket *Trek* with a great cast, snappy writing and plenty of strands to unwind in future episodes, *Strange New Worlds* achieves everything it intends. But there's a lingering feeling that there's perhaps not quite enough that's strange or new.**

THE OFFER

★★

OUT **NOW (PARAMOUNT+)**
EPISODES VIEWED **10 OF 10**
SHOWRUNNERS Michael Tolkin, Nikki Toscano
CAST Miles Teller, Matthew Goode, Dan Fogler

Everyone involved in this ten-part series about the making of *The Godfather* clearly understands why Francis Ford Coppola's film is a masterpiece. It's just a shame, then, that none of that knowledge was applied. Telling the story through the prism of producer Al Ruddy (Miles Teller, charming), it encompasses all the film's lore: the battles with the Mafia, the fights over casting (Anthony Ippolito's Pacino is uncanny). The cast, especially Matthew Goode as Paramount head Robert Evans and Juno Temple as Ruddy's assistant, are game, but whole thing lacks texture and sophistication. You can't help but feel *The Godfather* deserves much better. **IF**

THE MAN WHO FELL TO EARTH

★★★

OUT **NOW (PARAMOUNT+)**
EPISODES VIEWED **3 OF 10**
SHOWRUNNERS Alex Kurtzman, Jenny Lumet
CAST Chiwetel Ejiofor, Naomie Harris, Bill Nighy, Clarke Peters

This sequel to Nicolas Roeg's 1976 classic of the same name offers intriguing if occasionally unfocused sci-fi. Chiwetel Ejiofor is on fine form as Faraday, the extraterrestrial on a mission to find scientist Justin Falls (Naomie Harris). The show combines fish-out-of-water antics — Faraday's human assimilation involves liberal F-bomb usage and, er, hosepipe deepthroating — with more involving immigration allegory, leading to some jarring tonal shifts early doors. But if you bear with it, which the ace ensemble and beautiful cinematography makes much easier, this space oddity becomes a compelling exploration of humanity. **JK**

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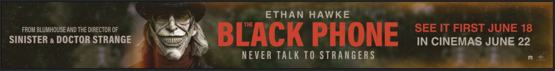

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Police and thieves: Jon Bernthal as Sergeant Wayne Jenkins.

[TV]

WE OWN THIS CITY

★★★★ OUT **NOW (SKY ATLANTIC/NOW)**
EPISODES VIEWED **4 OF 6**

SHOWRUNNERS David Simon, George Pelecanos
CAST Jon Bernthal, Wunmi Mosaku, Jamie Hector, Josh Charles, Dagmara Domińczyk

PLOT Sergeant Wayne Jenkins (Bernthal), a cop for the Baltimore Police Department, leads up the corrupt Gun Trace Task Force, his team stealing anything and assaulting anyone they see fit. When investigations from both the Department of Justice and FBI heat up, a reckoning soon comes for the BPD — and the city at large.

IN *THE WIRE*, David Simon's seminal, superlative early-2000s TV masterpiece, many characters — most memorably Dominic West's Jimmy McNulty — espouse the theory of "good police". (Spoken in a Baltimore accent, it's said more like "good *po*-lice".) Like everything in that show, it was a nebulous, ambiguous idea, existing forever in the greys between black and white. It's a concept that Simon — along with his creative partners, surely among the best television creators of all time — expands and explores in *We Own This City*, his much-awaited return to his beloved hometown.

Comparisons with *The Wire* are unavoidable, but it's interesting that just as much is different as is familiar. The gritty street corners of the earlier series are present and correct, and the two shows share several actors (*Wire*-heads will lose their shit when they first see former drug kingpins wearing suits and police badges). And as with the earlier show, Simon gives himself a wide remit, looking at not just policing but the criminal justice system at large, and how politics, unions, lawyers, professional criminals and regular folk interact with it.

But unlike *The Wire*, this is not fictional. Based on the book by *Baltimore Sun* reporter Justin Fenton, it is a sharply focused, finite story of the deeply corrupt Gun Trace Task Force (GTTF) within the Baltimore Police Department, and how that corruption speaks to the wider rot. It's about how the system around it not only allowed it to happen, but had structures in place to encourage it; and how policing works in the Black Lives Matter era (the real-life death of Freddie Gray at the hands of Baltimore Police, and the subsequent city-wide protests, is a key plot point).

Key to the GTTF is its charismatic leader Sgt Wayne Jenkins, played as a ball of terrifying, twitchy energy by Jon Bernthal. In Bernthal's hands Jenkins is pure charm offensive, with an emphasis on the offensive: a rivetingly physical performance that weaponises charisma into making criminal activity almost seem like the moral thing to do. While it's often a talky show, there are frequent flashes of vigorous action — confidently directed by Reinaldo Marcus Green — as the GTTF make their busts, the squad of macho cops practically getting aroused every time they find an illegal firearm.

Jenkins is just one piece of a complex puzzle, as the show darts between timelines and perspectives, spanning from 2003 to 2017. Much of it is told in flashback, as the net of an FBI investigation into the police slowly closes. Like *The Wire*, this is a show that demands your full attention, the scripts flooded with dense police and legal terminology that won't always be obvious — but Simon and his team show faith in the audience, a faith that is gradually, gratifyingly rewarded. *We Own This City* is not quite the all-encompassing socio-political experience of *The Wire*, and the concept of "good police" is ever nebulous, but as a careful chronicler of society at large, David Simon feels as essential as ever. **JOHN NUGENT**

VERDICT **More of an epilogue to *The Wire* than a spiritual sequel, David Simon's return to Baltimore is another intelligently crafted, angry treatise on America's fatally flawed institutions.**

ON SCREEN CHECKLIST

Your at-a-glance view of this month's reviews

FILM

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8 JULY

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TV

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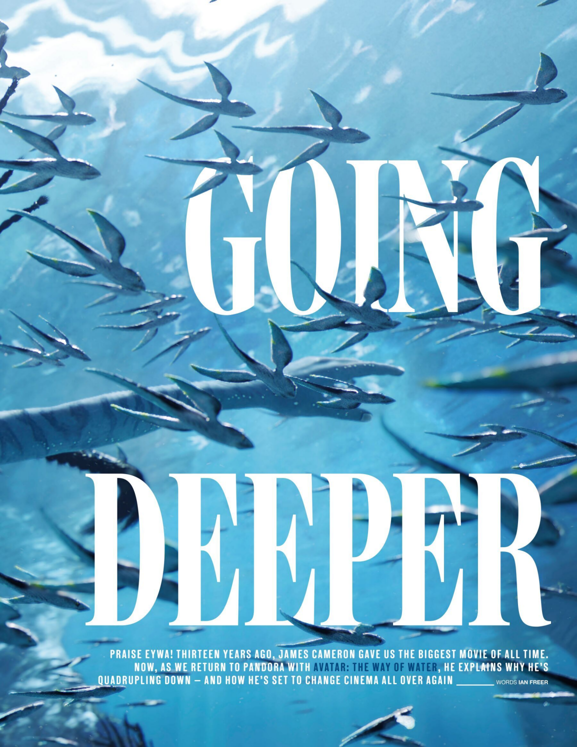


GOING DEEPER

PRAISE EYWA! THIRTEEN YEARS AGO, JAMES CAMERON GAVE US THE BIGGEST MOVIE OF ALL TIME. NOW, AS WE RETURN TO PANDORA WITH AVATAR: THE WAY OF WATER, HE EXPLAINS WHY HE’S QUADRUPLING DOWN – AND HOW HE’S SET TO CHANGE CINEMA ALL OVER AGAIN

WORDS **IAN FREER**

THE NA'VI WORD FOR IDIOT IS SKXAWNG.

Pronounced "scowned", it was an expression used regularly on the *Avatar: The Way Of Water* set when an actor or crew member messed up. And it's a derogatory term that James Cameron might well unleash about anyone who decries that the sequel is currently clocking in at three hours.

"I don't want anybody whining about length when they sit and binge-watch [television] for eight hours," he says on a Sunday evening from New Zealand, where he's in the midst of post-production. "I can almost write this part of the review. 'The agonisingly long three-hour movie...' It's like, give me a fucking break. I've watched my kids sit and do five one-hour episodes in a row. Here's the big social paradigm shift that has to happen: it's okay to get up and go pee." Call it 'The Way Of Passing Water'.

The official subtitle has all the feel of an arts-y mood title, but Cameron confirms it's An Actual Thing in the film. It stems from his unfinished novelisation of the first film ("I never have the damn time to write") where Zoe

Above: Colonel Miles Quaritch (Stephen Lang) broods in his new body. **Left:** Jack Champion (as Spider) and director James Cameron on set.

Saldaña's Neytiri has an ethos she calls 'the way of air'. By understanding how air, wind and turbulence interact, by understanding what air does to a creature's wing membranes, she believes, you can then fly more effectively. For the new film, he simply transposed the concept to water. "It's a repeated motif," he says. "'The way of water' is understanding the medium in which you operate."

The film that found critics readily deploying the word "game-changer", *Avatar* remains the highest-grossing film of all time ($2.8 billion and counting), so this sequel represents the biggest roll of the dice in Cameron's 41-year directorial career. "I had to think long and hard whether I even wanted to make another *Avatar* film, because it was kind of ours to lose," he rationalises. "When you've done something that's been that transcendent in terms of success, do you really want to go try and do that again? There's a lot of pressure on it. I thought about it for a good two years before we finally made a deal." As you'd expect from the filmmaker who supersized the *Alien* series by adding a shit-ton of xenomorphs or emboldened the *Terminator* saga via a ground-breaking CGI liquid metal assassin, Cameron's response was, go big or go Hometree. "What I said to the Fox regime at the time was, 'I'll do it, but we've got to play a larger game here. I don't want to just do a movie and then do a movie and do a movie. I want to tell a bigger story.' I said, 'Imagine a series of novels like *The Lord Of The Rings* existed, and we're adapting them.' Now, that was great in theory, but then I had to go create the frickin' novels from which to adapt it."

This shift to producing *four* sequels at bi-yearly intervals — 2022-2028 — some *13* years after the original is debatably one of the biggest gambles in Hollywood history. Given the scale of the task at hand, Cameron's way of water is far from plain sailing.

If *Avatar* was a romance between human Jake Sully (Sam Worthington) and Na'vi Neytiri (Saldaña), *The Way Of Water* kicks off an epic family saga. "I'm a father of five," says Cameron. "I look around — I don't want to specifically say the Marvel Universe, or the DC Universe — at current fantasy and science-fiction and all these heroes seem unbound in the mire of relationships, the stuff that pulls you down and clips your wings, that stops you running around and risking your life. I thought, 'What if I take these incredible characters of Jake and Neytiri and give them a family?' That gives them feet of clay right there."

So, Jake and Neytiri are raising children during a period of guerrilla warfare, as the humans represented by the RDA (Resources Development Administration), so royally routed last time, return to Pandora for resources and revenge. "It's very much about love in the time of war, family in the time of war, growth in the time of war," says Saldaña. But as well as being under threat from the RDA, the couple are battling about the best way to raise their kids.

"It's about what you are teaching your children as they develop, and grow," says Worthington. "Jake comes from the point of view of being a Marine and leans into that way of thinking because that's what was ingrained in him about surviving. Pacifism and militarism are definitely going to come clashing." Cameron sees it a different way. "It's just like my family; lots of conflict, lots of love; lots of hugs, lots of screaming." He says that "swathes" of *The Way Of Water*'s running time are handed over to the kids. There's Spider (Jack Champion), a teenage human left orphaned by the war; there are the Sullys' offspring — Neteyam (Jamie Flatters), › Lo'ak (Britain Dalton) and Tuktirey, known as 'Tuk' (Trinity Bliss); and Kiri, a Na'vi teenager adopted by Jake and Neytiri and played in performance capture by... Sigourney Weaver.

"As an acting challenge, it's big," says Cameron of the latter. "We're gonna have a 60-something actor playing a character [decades younger than] her actual biological age. Sig thought it was all kinds of fun." When Cameron pitched the idea over lunch, Weaver was pumped. "I think we all pretty much remember what we were feeling like as adolescents," she says. "I certainly do. I was 5' 10" or 5' 11" when I was 11. I felt strongly that Kiri would feel awkward a lot of the time. She's searching for who she is. I was thrilled to be given that challenge by Jim."

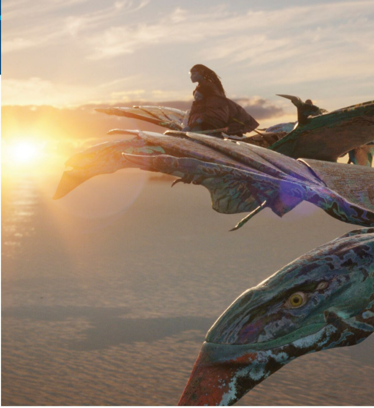
To enter Kiri's headspace, Weaver workshopped with a bunch of teenage girls. "She just hung out with them and studied them, how they think, how they move, how they act," says Cameron. "There was lots of eye-rolling, which I know well from my own girls when they were teenagers, completely psychotic." When Weaver moved to the performance-capture volume, it was revelatory. "Even though you're looking at Sigourney and she's clearly not a young girl, the essence she was giving me allowed me to be her father," says Worthington.

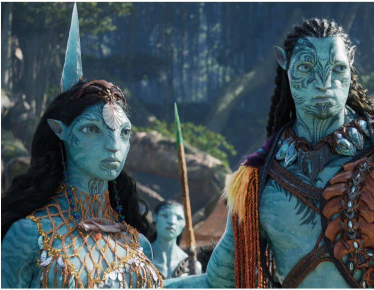
Cameron noticed a rejuvenation of the actor he first worked with 36 years ago on *Aliens*. "Sigourney just became younger. She looked younger, she had more energy, and she never quite stepped out of Kiri for our whole capture period," he says. "She had a glow on her face and lightness in her step and a fun spirit." Weaver says Cameron knew he was on the right track. "Jim was very funny," she laughs. 'He said, 'You're so immature, this will be so easy for you.'"

Finding her inner child might have been easy, but for Weaver, and the rest of the *Way Of Water* team, the biggest challenge involved a much deeper dive. Literally.

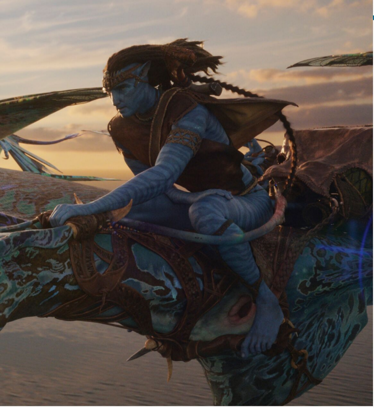
If the beauty of Pandora's rainforests was inspired by Cameron's passion for conservation, the backdrop for much of *The Way Of Water* — the planet's picturesque reefs — comes from his love of the sea. This, after all, is a man who has plumbed the depths of the Mariana Trench, the deepest one on Earth.

Displaced from their home, the Sullys flee to the coastline and meet the Metkayina tribe, a clan living the life aquatic, led by Tonowari (Cliff Curtis) and Ronal (Kate Winslet). Perhaps unsurprisingly, Jake's reputation as a war hero precedes him, but not necessarily for good. "When he shows up in our neighbourhood, because of his history, we know the colonisers will most likely follow him," says Curtis. "But we





Clockwise from top: Ronal (Kate Winslet) and Lo'ak (Britain Dalton) take flight; Winslet and Sigourney Weaver on set; Ronal, Tonowari (Cliff Curtis) and the Metkayina tribe.



have a culture where we must be hospitable to those that show up at our doorstep. So, it's not an easy situation at all." Even though the story was conceived years ago, for Saldaña, the Sullys' journey, becoming immigrants/strangers among these reef people, conjures up eerie contemporary resonances. "It will be very relatable to how we see foreign policy," she laughs. "Nations are currently at war and a big nation is being requested to take in refugees. I really feel the Metkayina are no different. They are going, 'Who are these people? Why the fuck? Can they make it work anywhere else? What do we stand to lose if we let them in?'"

The Way Of Water, of course, marks Kate Winslet's first film with Cameron since *Titanic*. "Jim and I are both totally different people now to who we were 26 years ago," she says. "He is calmer, and I am definitely more hyperactive now!" Still, Winslet was nervous. "I had to get with the lingo and catch up with everyone, since they know the world of Pandora much more intensively than I do," she admits. "I had a few butterflies on my first day of rehearsal." Strength and sustenance came with playing Ronal (rhymes with "toe nail"), another powerhouse female protagonist to stand alongside Cameron's Ellen Ripley, Sarah Connor, Rose and Neytiri. "She is deeply loyal and a fearless leader," says Winslet. "She is strong. A warrior. Even in the face of grave danger, and with an unborn baby on board, she still joins her people and fights for what she holds most dear. Her family and their home."

Living on atolls, the Metkayina are super-swimmers that would rinse that Duke Of Edinburgh Award diving-in-pyjamas-for-a-

›

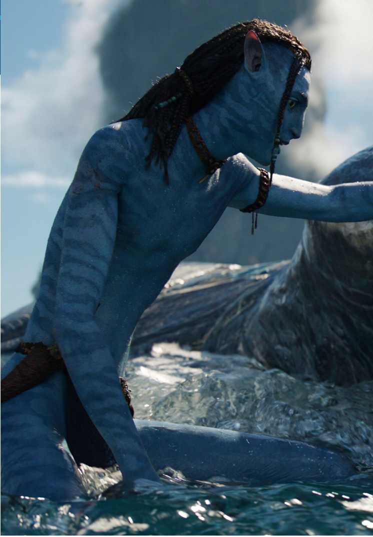
brick test. "They are adapted for the ocean," says Bailey Bass, who plays Tsireya, Tonowari and Ronal's daughter. "Their tails are thicker and their skin is a shark-like colour." In realising these Na'vi SEALs, Cameron tested shooting dry for wet (simulating underwater conditions by suspending actors on wires on a dry stage) and compared it against performance capture carried out underwater. "It was just so compellingly clear it could only be done in water," he says. "Besides, the movie is called *The Way Of Water*. It's not called 'The Way Of Dry For Wet'."

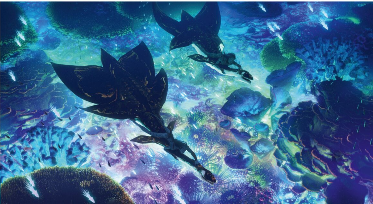
This is the film's real technological breakthrough: sub-aqua performance capture, taking the process out of a grey volume and into a 900,000-gallon tank, replete with a wavemaker to replicate the ocean's currents. "We could not let the light from above go directly into the water, or it would take away from our ability to capture," says Richard Baneham, visual-effects creative supervisor at Cameron's company Lightstorm. "We couldn't put a canvas across the tank because it wouldn't be safe. So, we put hundreds of small, white polymer balls on the water that would diffuse the light but [still] allowed the actors to come up for breath."

As the bubbles from scuba equipment would also interfere with the dots that read the information for capture, Cameron brought in world-champion freediver Kirk Krack to teach his cast and crew how to survive underwater purely through sustained breath-holds. The actors were sent on a field trip to Hawaii to get the hang of it all — "We met a manta ray and I turned into a five-year-old," marvels Cliff Curtis — then got to grips with Cameron's diktat that they act underwater without their cheeks puffed out, their lips pursed together or big bulging eyes, in scenes running two to three minutes. "It's the hardest thing I've ever had to do," admits Worthington. "You're dealing with the restrictions of freediving, the constraints of motion capture underwater, and you're trying to keep an emotional journey going while you're innately struggling with the fear of dying."

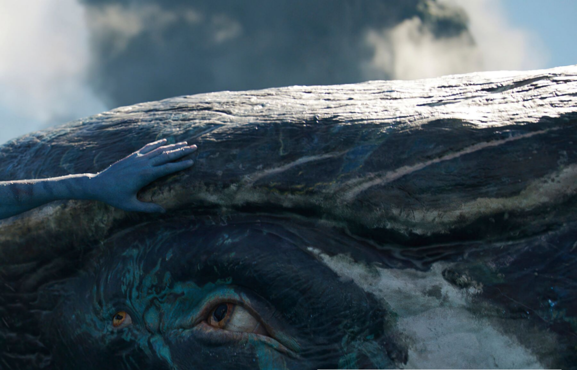
As anyone involved will tell you, the winner of the *Way Of Water* Freediving Championship was Kate Winslet. "Seven minutes and 14 seconds, baby!" she beams about holding the longest breath among the cast. She loved how calm it made her feel, she says, "but the most amazing thing for me as a middle-aged woman was to learn something not just new, but superhuman!"

With Winslet having previously undergone arduous tank work on *Titanic*, Cameron admits he "was surprised she was willing to come back here to work on the water. The thing is, it is about mindset. Her character in *Titanic* is supposed to be afraid of water and the water was supposed to be frigid, freezing cold, which it was not. The way Kate works is, to coin a term, immersive, so that I'm not sure she knew where the line was between genuine fear and acted fear. This time around, her



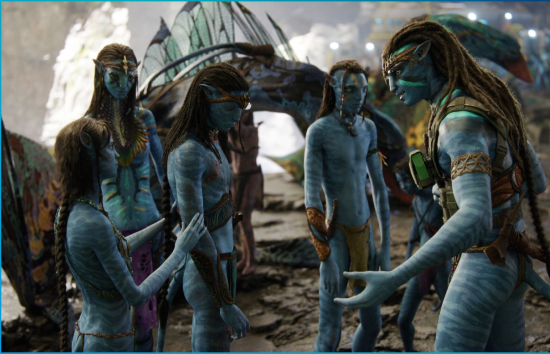


Clockwise from top: Lo'ak with a tulkun; The master at work; Jake Sully (Sam Worthington) and Neytiri (Zoe Saldaña) enjoy a moment; Pandora's bio-reef in its full glory.



character was supposed to be exceedingly comfortable in water and she had a great time." Winslet confirms she had no reservations. "I don't know if you noticed, but the guy makes great water movies!" she says.

This was her first experience with performance capture, and Winslet felt it was "like being in a really funky cool tech gang, but on steroids". Cameron argues the improvements in technology mean the characters look "more sophisticated, more real", but acknowledges, "I don't think the audience gives you points for that. If they're swept away by the story, they just go with it." He is aiming for a "dynamic equipoise between that which is beautiful and that which is terrifying." And in the *Avatar* universe, if terror has a name, it must be Colonel Miles Quaritch. ›

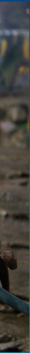


AVATAR: THE NEXT GENERATION

MEET PANDORA'S BRIGHT YOUNG THINGS

NETEYAM (JAMIE FLATTERS)
"It's nice to know that I wasn't just delusional and it wasn't all a three-year fever dream," says Jamie Flatters about finally watching the first *The Way Of Water* trailer. The 21-year-old plays Neteyam, the Sully kid who is "trying to be the hero of the story and obviously failing". A lo-fi filmmaker himself, Flatters found himself in the high-tech arena of performance capture: "The tech guys would be on high stools with their computers like a weird, 21st-century Colosseum." Starting shooting aged 17, Flatters describes his Pandora tour as a "life-shaping experience. I will talk about *Avatar* the way my parents talk about university." Minus the cheap bar and daytime television.

LO'AK (BRITAIN DALTON)
Lo'ak, another of the Sully kids, is at the heart of one of *The Way Of Water*'s key storylines: his tender friendship with a tulkun, a sentient whale-like creature, named Payakan. "It's a boy-and-his-dog story," explains James Cameron, "but the dog is 98 feet long and weighs 15 tons." Perhaps the biggest challenge came in creating the emotional bond between the pair. "The sheer scale of tulkuns as creatures makes it very hard to get people to invest emotion," says Lightstorm VFX guru Richard Baneham. "We have a relatively small range of articulation. There's a shot after Lo'ak and Payakan meet for the first time and, with all his body, Payakan says, 'Let's play.' It's very, very touching."



Top: Kiri (Sigourney Weaver), Neytiri, Neteyam (Jamie Flatters), Lo'ak, Tuk (Trinity Bliss) and Jake have a confab. **Below:** Spider roaming Pandora's forests of delight.

TSIREYA (BAILEY BASS)
Bailey Bass' pro-acting career started in *Avatar: The Way Of Water*'s performance-capture volume. "I had nothing to compare it to," she says. "It made being in live action later really confusing." Playing Metkayina freediver Tsireya, the graceful daughter of Ronal and Tonowari, the now 19-year-old actor recalls "sneaking on set just to watch Kate Winslet and Zoe Saldaña act together. I was a sponge." Also, for educational purposes, Bass took the 'Avatar Flight Of Passage' ride at Disney's Animal Kingdom, which previews the giant tulkun sea creature that plays a key role in the new film. "I was like, 'People don't know yet. Are we allowed to freak out about this?'"

TUKTIREY (TRINITY BLISS)
"Trinity is one of the most amazing humans I've ever met," says Cameron. "She wants to be either an astrophysicist or a molecular biologist. She can't decide right now." Auditioning aged seven (she's now 12), Bliss is Neteyam and Lo'ak's sister Tuktirey, or Tuk. "Tuk has a huge heart, she's curious and she's sometimes a bit afraid," says Bliss, who showed no such nerves on set, bonding with Sigourney Weaver ("sister Siggy") and Kate Winslet. "She's just so beautiful, her voice is so soothing." she says of Winslet. "I went to craft services to get her English tea. Everyone was laughing at me, but I think she loved her tea."

KIRI (SIGOURNEY WEAVER)
Played by an actor decades older than she is, Kiri, the adopted daughter of Jake and Neytiri, is a free-spirited teen. "I said to Jim, 'Neytiri is so beautiful, capable and intimidating, it's a lot to live up to,'" says Sigourney Weaver. "I feel like Kiri doesn't feel she can ever be that." Weaver subsequently pushed the designers to visualise Kiri as less self-possessed, her input encouraged by her director. "Jim made us feel very free and relaxed," she says. "As much as you can feel free and relaxed in a shoot that's costing a gazillion dollars."

SPIDER (JACK CHAMPION)
Jack Champion remembers exactly where he was when he learned he nailed the role of Spider. "I was in an Uber with my mom," he recalls. "I didn't immediately lose my crap; I was in shock, almost." Champion's Spider is a human orphan who feels "very emotionally connected with the Na'vi culture. He's very quick-witted. He likes adventure." So does Champion, who performed that stomach-flipping leap into a pool glimpsed in the trailer. "That wasn't fake," he says proudly. "We jumped about 20 feet into the water. That was a fun day."

Above: Cameron in his element.

At the heart of Lightstorm HQ in Los Angeles is a large room housing the iconic fruits of Cameron's career: *The Terminator*'s T-800, *Aliens*' Alien Queen, *True Lies*' AV-8B Harrier jump jet and *Titanic*'s Best Picture Oscar, miniature passenger liner and the car that played host to Jack and Rose's rumpy-pumpy, complete with hand-prints on a steamed-up back window. Producer Jon Landau is *Empire*'s host and is currently warming to his theme: the reappearance of the RDA on Pandora, 14 years after they got served.

"They are coming back with an armada to take back the prized possession that they lost," says Landau, framed by busts of the original film's Na'vi *dramatis personae*. The RDA return with not only new hardware but also an entire city, Bridgehead, built near the coastline (think a highly militarised, mechanised Torquay), perfectly placed to plunder the ocean's riches. In a typically Cameron-esque twist, rather than bringing a gigantic payload from Earth to Pandora, they have constructed a massive 3D printing facility that prints out tech and weaponry to huge effect. "This is RDA scale," says Landau.

Most significantly, the RDA are also packing Colonel Miles Quaritch. At the end of the original *Avatar*, the Colonel (Stephen Lang) was taken down by Neytiri's arrows. In the interim, the RDA have advanced technology so the memories of their best soldiers can be embedded into genetically autonomous avatars, known as Recoms (short for Recombinants). Hence Quaritch is back, this time in Na'vi form — but he still has the eagle tattoo on his shoulder to mark where his RDA loyalties lie.

"He's bigger, he's bluer, he's pissed off," laughs Lang. "But there may possibly be an aspect of humility. When you take two Na'vi arrows in the chest, that's gonna have some kind of effect on you." But blue and humility are not the only colours added to the character's palate. "Quaritch was always a character who moved in straight lines and at right angles," says Lang. "But now he is as lithe as they come. He can move with the same kind of cunning and feral quality that any of the Na'vi can." Bereft of his hi-tech hardware, Lang thinks "the look is strong and powerful. I would always say, 'Jim, make his biceps a little bigger.'" Despite working in performance capture, the actor still had to get match-fit for a short video recording in human form. "He had to do all the physical prep he did for the first movie for just a one-minute scene," laughs Cameron. Once that scene was shot, Lang decided to stay in shape, so found himself kickboxing three or four times a week with the director at 5.30am.

"We'd basically start the day by punching the fuck out of each other and just enjoyed the hell out of it," says Cameron. "He's not a guy that knows how to pull a punch, so after getting bagged a few times, I thought, 'Alright, it's on!' I said, 'It doesn't matter if you've got a big ol' shiner or a fat lip because it's performance capture.' Every insurance company in the world would shit themselves if they thought the director was punching the star in the face every day. And of course, it doesn't matter as a director if you get a fat lip so it's all good."

Yet the biggest battle Cameron faces on *The Way Of Water* isn't with family dynamics or bleeding-edge technology or even Stephen Lang haymakers. It is with the brave new world the film enters on 16 December 2022.

There were seven years between *Alien* and *Aliens*. Same with *Terminator* and *Terminator 2*. *The Way Of Water* bows some 13 years after the original. Cameron acknowledges, "We've gotten into a little bit of an outer orbit and we've got to re-establish ourselves." He is readying the original for re-release in September, but has no truck with ›

the related online snark that appears any time *Avatar* trends.

"The trolls will have it that nobody gives a shit and they can't remember the characters' names or one damn thing that happened in the movie," he says. "Then they see the movie again and go, 'Oh, okay, excuse me, let me just shut the fuck up right now.' So, I'm not worried about that."

Although he was buoyed by *The Way Of Water* teaser trailer receiving 148 million hits in its first 24 hours, what does concern Cameron is the change in industry and audience habits. From his cult-y sci-fi beginnings, he has morphed into a four-quadrant filmmaker making films that pull off the nifty trick of playing entirely across the board without ever feeling bland or try-hard. But the shortening of theatrical release windows, mass audiences staying home to enjoy streaming and the pandemic keeping older punters away, all could coalesce to scupper his chances of reaching every demographic.

"*Avatar* played eight to 80," he says. "Does the audience still even exist at that scale? It doesn't take much. If we did 20 per cent or 30 per cent less because the market simply doesn't exist anymore, that would be bad. I told everybody going in it was the dumbest business case in history to try to do this again. But, here we are."

FLUID DYNAMICS

JAMES CAMERON HAS ALWAYS HAD A WAY WITH WATER

ALIENS (1986)

Putting his disowned debut *Piranha II: The Spawning* aside, Cameron's first brush with the wet stuff comes in this classic scare moment: as Newt (Carrie Henn), chest-high in water, waits to be rescued, a pesky xenomorph slowly rises behind her and takes her down. Cut to a chilling glimpse of a submerged doll's face. Don't worry — Newt survives.

THE ABYSS (1989)

Stuck in a mini-sub taking on water with her husband Bud (Ed Harris), hard-as-nails Dr Lindsey Brigman (Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio) gives the one working diving suit to Bud and plumps to enter deep hypothermia as the water engulfs her. Bud brings her body back to the surface, and the subsequent lengthy resuscitation scene becomes real heart-in-mouth stuff.

TITANIC (1997)

In a film full of awesome aqua action, debatably the most moving moment (sorry, Leo stans) is the death of the ship's captain, Edward J. Smith (Bernard Hill). Rejecting help from his crew, Smith returns to the sinking wheelhouse, his fate sealed. The windows crash one by one, water flooding in quickly filling up the small space. It's a soggy but dignified, stately demise.

Above: Na'vi teen Kiri (Sigourney Weaver) watches footage of Grace Augustine (also Weaver). **Left:** Weaver and Cameron on set. **Below:** The Bridgehead military base.

Yet it's more than just the fate of one film that hangs in the balance here. If *The Way Of Water* sinks, so does a project of personal filmmaking on the grandest scale. The story has its roots in Cameron's upbringing as a science geek (famously, he lowered a mouse in a diving bell made out of a mayo jar to the bottom of a creek), foraging in forests and idolising his childhood hero, French oceanographer Jacques Cousteau. You can dismiss this saga as films about big blue space cats, but for Cameron, his art lies deep in his heart.

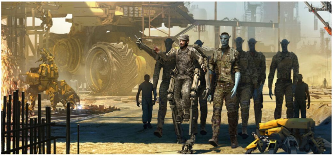
"Everything I need to say about family, about sustainability, about climate, about the natural world, the themes that are important to me in real life and in my cinematic life, I can say on this canvas. In the writing across these four films, I got more excited as I went along. Movie four is a corker. It's a *motherfucker*. I actually hope I get to make it. But it depends on market forces. Three is in the can so it's coming out regardless. I really hope that we get to make four and five because it's one big story, ultimately."

Cameron's own ambitions as a filmmaker might also play a vital role in the franchise's future. He has flitted between fiction and non-fiction (including documentaries with *National Geographic*) for some 20 years and can't help but think about projects post-Pandora. "The *Avatar* films themselves are kind of all-consuming," he admits. "I've got some other things I'm developing as well that are exciting. I think eventually over time — I don't know if that's after three or after four — I'll want to pass the baton to a director that I trust to take over, so I can go do some other stuff that I'm also interested in. Or maybe not. I don't know."

At the moment, though, Cameron is all about *Avatar*. With Covid adding delays, he is racing against time to complete the performance capture for later instalments before his young cast age out. "There's a big time-jump in the story that takes place in the first act of movie four," he says. As for how the saga develops, he says "it has magnificent scope. It gets very fucking dark and tragic, there are serious consequences. You're asked to invest in an idea of hope for everybody, hope for the Na'vi and hope for the humans. That to me is the big ethical and moral shift. It's a story about hope."

Let's hope it all comes to pass. If anyone can change the game twice, it's Cameron. Few filmmakers understand the way of water, the medium in which he operates, better. As such, you'd be a *skxawng* to bet against him. ●

AVATAR: THE WAY OF WATER IS IN CINEMAS FROM 16 DECEMBER



PUPPET

After the one-two sucker punch of *Get Out* and *Us*, Jordan Peele is back to terrify

MASTER

WORDS ELLEN E JONES

us with UFO thriller NOPE. He tells us why he keeps flipping horror on its head

For almost a year, that one-word title — *Nope* — was all we knew about Jordan Peele's new one. Yet that was enough. Because with just two movies behind him, a new Jordan Peele outing is already an event. That's been the case since his 2017 debut, the instant classic *Get Out* — about a Black guy's (Daniel Kaluuya) terrifying encounter with his white girlfriend's (Allison Williams) family — grossed $255 million on a $4.5 million budget, and got white liberal America reflecting on the reality of racism. And with the 2019 release of his Lupita Nyong'o-starring doppelgänger dread-fest *Us*, Peele became a bona fide horror auteur.

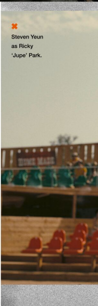
In *Nope*, Kaluuya and Keke Palmer co-star as siblings running a California ranch, supplying horses to movie sets. One day, they spot a UFO and determine to capture it on camera. With a bigger scale than *Get Out* and *Us*, and more ambitious filmmaking, it may well take Peele's reputation for super-smart genre cinema to the next level.

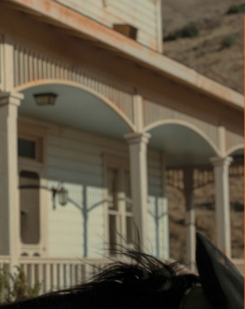
If the 'auteur' tag sounds overblown, consider what else Peele, via his Monkeypaw Productions company, has ushered into existence: Spike Lee's *BlacKkKlansman*, HBO series *Lovecraft Country*, plus reboots of *Candyman* and *The Twilight Zone*. And as a filmmaker, he operates on multiple, seemingly contradictory levels simultaneously. He can make a fun, Saturday-night movie that's also a ferociously astute social satire. Or, as with *Nope*, a potential summer blockbuster that looks like it might be his most intense, inward-looking film yet.

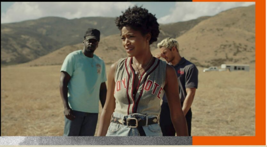
Talking to *Empire* in a Western-style shirt, Peele looks impeccably turned out and is unmistakably himself: he is friendly and fun, but occasionally betrays a hint of nervous anticipation. Ever the pop-culture nerd, he knows his work will live on through 1,000 in-depth YouTube analyses and gloriously convoluted fan theories. *Nope* may have a title that rings with finality, but the conversation has only just begun.

Let's start with possibly an easy one, possibly an incredibly difficult one: What's *Nope* about?
Nope! [*Laughs*] No, no, I *can* answer this. If I can't, I'm in the wrong place, am I not? I started off wanting to make a film that would put an audience in the immersive experience of being in the presence of a UFO. And I wanted to make a spectacle, something that would promote my favourite art form and my favourite way of watching that art form: the theatrical experience. As I started writing the script, I started to dig into the nature of spectacle, our addiction to spectacle, and the insidious nature of attention. So that's what it's about. And it's about a brother and sister, and healing their relationship.

You've spoken before about your mission to reclaim the horror genre for people of colour. Do you see this film as part of that?
I think it is about that, to the point where that very theme has made its way into the plot of the movie. I think what I'm most proud about with *Nope* is that it's about humanity. It's a movie that stars


Steven Yeun as Ricky 'Jupe' Park.





Left and above: Daniel Kaluuya and Keke Palmer as UFO-hunting siblings OJ and Emerald Haywood. **Below:** With Angel Torres (Brandon Perea).

Black people and it's an adventure, and it's scary, it's also funny, it's about joy, it's committed to by the studio [*chuckles*] and by everybody. It's a real movie with a capital 'M', that's original, and it stars people of colour. And that in itself is really, I think, all it needs to be somewhat progressive.

I had a fascinating chat the other day with an indigenous film critic, Jesse Wente, who was saying that alien-invasion movies land differently when you're an indigenous person, because the big fear of being invaded has already happened. Are you also playing with shifting perspectives on what's scary?

Yeah, obviously, there's Black leads in this movie, so I probably thought of it a bit more through that perspective. The part of African-American history that this addresses more than anything is the spectacle-isation of Black people, as well as the erasure of us, from the industry, from many things. I think in a lot of ways, this film is a response to the Muybridge clip, which was the first series of photographs put in sequential order to create a moving image; and it was a Black man on a horse. We know who Eadweard Muybridge is, the man who created the clip, but we don't know who this guy on the horse is. He's the first movie star, the first animal trainer, the first stunt rider ever on film, and no-one knows who he is! That erasure is part of what the lead characters in this movie are trying to correct. They're trying to claim their rightful place as part of the spectacle. And what the film also deals with is the toxic nature of attention and the insidiousness of our human addiction to spectacle.

Are we talking about phone addiction and endless doom-scrolling?

I think that that's a part of it. I think humans will get spectacle wherever we can get it. The doom-scrolling is a good way for us to realise that something's gotten out of hand. If we've gotten to the point where, before we get up in the morning, we scroll through our Twitter feed, see one of the worst pieces of imagery imaginable, and then turn it off, make your cereal, go about your day... Something is twisted there. I looked at it like bottlenecking at a car accident. Why is it that traffic slows down? No individual is saying, "I want to slow traffic down," but our morbid curiosity is screwing everybody. Every single person needs that extra two seconds of a glance to see if they can see something. And, by the way, I acknowledge it in myself: I'm a victim of this, I'm a perpetrator of this, I'm creating a spectacle, because I want people to come and see it, and I want people to get escapism.

Are there any elements of the Western in this too? Because obviously we're seeing cowboy hats, horses, those incredible landscapes...

Yeah, it's funny, I'm a big fan of films like *Once* ›

Upon A Time In The West, *Unforgiven*. It's a genre I am passionate about and at the same time, I never thought I'd approach it. And so I didn't really approach it. I approached the Hollywood take on the genre, which seemed to be ripe for a bit of satire. [It's] the uncanny nature of the spectacle-isation of cowboy culture and the Wild West, which is a celebrated time of murder, illness and suffering of many people, but we hold it in much regard in the States! And I guess the whole world does. So yeah, I think the film is *not* a Western, but it is about Westerns in some ways.

It looks like this will be filmmaking on a scale that we haven't really seen you do before. When you were bringing together a team that could pull that off, who did you call first?
Well, one of our hinge collaborators is Hoyte Van Hoytema, the cinematographer, which is a bit of a meta thing because there's a cinematographer in the film [played by Michael Wincott]. In a movie that is about capturing a UFO on film and that adventure, the first thing I asked Hoyte was, "If you had to capture the most important piece of footage of all time, how would you do it?" And we approached it like that. So we kind of approached making the film like the adventure within the film. We shot a third in IMAX, which is a totally immersive experience, and the rest of it in 65mm film, and he's just done beautiful work.

Is the landscape particularly important?
Yeah, the set is extraordinarily important. It's a huge area, a big valley, where our main characters live on this ranch. And one of the things that we were able to do with Hoyte is really revolutionise the way you shoot night scenes in this huge valley. There's some game-changing things happening in the technical aspect, that hopefully people will not be distracted by. They'll hopefully just think they're watching something gorgeous. No, they will, *they will*! It looks gorgeous! Trust me! I don't need to sell it.

Sold! Another key collaborator is *Get Out*'s Daniel Kaluuya. Is he your on-screen avatar?
Yeah, I mean that's what he's been for these two films. You always cast a much more attractive person as your avatar. Everyone in Hollywood knows that rule. But we do have a bond. The first big movie he was a lead in, and my directorial debut, was *Get Out*. And we bonded because we went through that together. In the beginning of that, it feels like two people who have faith in each other, then by the end, it all works. So I just couldn't wait to further that relationship and explore a completely new character with Daniel.

Will this be an ongoing Scorsese/De Niro thing?
It's so funny, but by the point I was in the middle of [shooting] *Get Out*, that's what I was telling him. I was like [*makes serious eye contact*], "You're my De Niro, man. You're *my* De Niro."

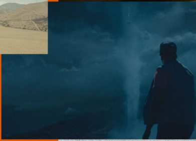
Putting that groundwork in…
I was like, "I need you to be in the future ones too, man!" You could just tell what we had in him as a performer, from the very beginning.

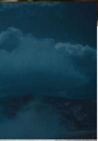
And what was it that made Keke Palmer right for this film?
It's so many things. She was another person that I had her in my head when I was writing and I reached out to her very early on in the process to collaborate with her, in terms of figuring out who she was, so I could bring in a bit of that. She's just wonderful, hardworking, funny, intelligent. She's such a joy.

From the footage we've seen, you've got your cast doing all manner of naysaying, "naaahs" and "nopes" in this film…
Yeah, we took every opportunity to get a "nope" in that we could,

Here: High noon: Emerald in the empty streets. **Below:** A "nope!" moment?; **Bottom:** Director Jordan Peele cites classic Westerns as influences.

Above, top to bottom: Three amigos — Kaluuya, Perea and Palmer; That's not human; Emerald in the frame; Ricky reflects; OJ alone.





that made sense. And I think there's something cathartic about it for an audience that's seen a lot of movies in the horror genre, where people will walk down a scary corridor or something when they should be saying, "Nope!" We got to make up for some lost "nopes" out here!

There's this really palpable, crackling mood of anticipation for *Nope*. Do you see whipping up that kind of excitement as part of your job as a filmmaker?
Yes, I love expectations, because expectations can be used, and I can divert from where you're going. I mean, I'm just thrilled that there's engagement. I'm thrilled with the way that people watch these films; I feel like they do it actively, like they're looking for the treasures. From a filmmaker standpoint, I can't tell you how close I feel to the fans of these films, for that reason. I really do feel like it's this conversation. And so, yeah, I just hope to give them something that is undeniably me, but is also something they really, really did not expect.

From what you said about wanting to promote the theatrical experience, this does sound like a film that emerged from lockdown. Would *Nope* have happened if it hadn't been for the pandemic?
Probably not. I think every movie comes together because of the time I write it. I've gotten to a point where people ask me about the message of my films. I don't actually think that people want to see a film with a message, or where a director is trying to tell them something. But I think people like stories where there are layers. And I think people like to have intelligent discussions afterward, where they can dig deeper into something that they haven't thought before.

Is this the kind of movie that will reward repeat viewings?
Well, hey, I can't not do me, right? I mean, I'm obsessed with Easter eggs. I'm obsessed with connection. I love to reward the person who wants to come and just watch a movie and forget about it. I love to reward the person that wants to watch 100 times. So yeah, I've gone deep into this movie, and I think it's probably an audience's choice how far they want to go.

Finally, the big question: do you believe that humans are alone in the universe?
No. Well, I mean, first of all, animals, so there's that. But scientifically it's very, very, very unlikely, according to all the amateur YouTube videos I've been watching, for aliens to not exist. It just wouldn't make sense. Can you imagine if we were the only intelligent species in the universe? That would terrify me. That's a lot of pressure.

So, if aliens visited Earth, would you be up for a meet-and-greet?
Would I be the person? I mean, I'd be terrified if they asked for me. I wouldn't know what that would be about. But yeah, that's a big, "Nope." I wouldn't be that guy. I would probably be somewhere, as far away from the arrival ship as possible, watching it on my little screen in my hand, just huddled up somewhere.

***NOPE* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 12 AUGUST**

GOD OF ⚡

FUN

Think *Thor: Ragnarok* was nuts? Well, *THOR: LOVE AND THUNDER* – flying goats and all – may well out-nut it. Yet, as director Taika Waititi and his cast tell us, this one wants to make you cry, too. Let the cosmic romcom commence

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

TAIKA WAITITI HAS A LOW BOREDOM THRESHOLD.

Ask anyone. Ask Chris Hemsworth: "Taika is someone, like me, who can get distracted easily or bored easily and needs more stimulation and entertainment to keep him focused." Or ask Natalie Portman. "Taika is so brilliant, I just don't know how he's that generative of ideas," she says. "If you shoot something and you do the same thing twice, you see his heart fall, in a way." Hell, ask Waititi himself: "You watch these films over and over and over again, and then eventually you just become numb to it," he says. "You get bored of an idea and get rid of it and then replace it with something better."

It's a feature, not a bug. It's why the New Zealand director's filmography is littered with the kind of tenacious tonal shifts that would derail many lesser movies: think of the way a scene of intense grief in *Hunt For The Wilderpeople* slingshots into a comedically inept eulogy (delivered by Waititi himself), or the moment in *Jojo Rabbit* where a butterfly flies away to suddenly reveal one of the most devastating deaths in recent cinematic memory, or the part in *Thor: Ragnarok* where Asgard blows up, followed immediately by an undercutting one-liner. This is where Waititi likes to operate: if something's not working, he likes to mix things up, switch things around. And if something is working, he switches things up, mixes things around anyway.

Which is exactly what he vowed to do when he decided to make *Thor: Love And Thunder*, his second film with Hemsworth as Marvel's God of Thunder. He knew that people, overwhelmingly, would want a repeat of *Ragnarok*, a film so deliciously demented that a giant hologram of Jeff Goldblum wouldn't even make a list of the top ten weirdest things in it. But he switched it up. "Taika said he didn't want to make 'Ragnarok 2'," says Kevin Feige, Marvel Studios' main man, producer of *Love And Thunder*, and the guy who first brought Waititi on board. "He didn't want to just say, 'Hey, how much more silly can we be?'"

Instead, Waititi, on the night that *Ragnarok* opened in cinemas in 2017, had sushi with Hemsworth, and started sketching out ideas for a film that would bring the thunder (naturally) but also the love. "He had this idea," says Hemsworth. "He wanted to make a romantic comedy, sprinkled with epic action and special effects. It was like they said to a seven-year-old, 'You're going to make a movie, what are you going to put in there?' 'Well, flying goats and this character and that character,' and they just kept saying, 'Yes.' It's wild. It's the most crazy thing I've been a part of."

A romcom in space? With superheroes? And flying goats? Take that, boredom threshold.

Top: Chris Hemsworth as Thor, Dave Bautista as Drax and Chris Pratt as Star-Lord/ Peter Quill. **Right:** It's Hammer time: Thor with The Mighty Thor (Natalie Portman) — now proud owner of Mjolnir — and King Valkyrie (Tessa Thompson).

Top to bottom: Director Taika Waititi and Hemsworth on set; Thor surveys the carnage; Karen Gillan as Nebula.

In Hemsworth, Waititi has the perfect creative partner to overcome low boredom thresholds. For he's got one himself, and by the time *Ragnarok*, the third Thor movie, started to loom into view, it had been well and truly activated. *Thor: The Dark World* is better than its reputation suggests, but it still didn't really test Hemsworth or progress the character, while he spent most of *Avengers: Age Of Ultron* in a day spa for superheroes. "When I was talking to Taika about doing a third one, prior to him getting the job," recalls Hemsworth, "I said, 'Look, I'm really sick of the character.' He said, 'Yes, so am I.'"

So the two set about bashing the reset button with glee for *Ragnarok*. They leaned heavily into the humour Hemsworth had always been capable of (witness him asking for a drink in *Thor*, or trying to hang Mjolnir on a coat rack in *The Dark World*), but depriving him of (in no particular order of importance) his hair, his hammer, his father, his right eye, his sister (who he had only just found out he had), and his planet.

That positioned him nicely to be the MVP of *Avengers: Infinity War*, where he swiftly also lost his brother Loki and best friend Heimdall, bared his soul to a talking raccoon, and almost killed Thanos with his new enchanted axe, Stormbreaker, before barrelling into *Avengers: Endgame*. Where, suffering from depression after blaming himself for Thanos' Snap, he lost his nerve and gained a few pounds. That movie ends with Dad-bod Thor rediscovering his mojo and, after Thanos is done and dusted, heading off with Peter Quill and the Guardians Of The Galaxy, destination unknown. Those three movies together represented a vast arc for the character, turning him into one of the most complex, tragic, funny and powerful characters in the MCU. Naturally, then, the only thing for Waititi and Hemsworth to do was to hit the reset button again. "When you've got nothing left to destroy," laughs Waititi, "the ego's next."

Love And Thunder sees Thor at something of a loss, existentially-speaking. No longer the King Of Asgard (that job belongs to Tessa Thompson's Valkyrie, with New Asgard now located on Earth), with no familial ties to keep him anywhere, he sets off on a quest to locate his Special Purpose. "The challenge you want to give someone like Thor, who's got superhuman strength and is a god and has got Chris Hemsworth's face, is have him going through an existential crisis or a midlife crisis," says Waititi. "He's essentially trying to find himself, trying to find out who he is, which is my favourite version of Thor, I think. Should he be a superhero? Should he be a gardener? All the questions that most of us eventually ask ourselves. Should I be a filmmaker? Was that just a bad decision? Should I have ever left New Zealand?"

Thor is looking, essentially, for Thor. And Thor is exactly what he gets — although not in the way he had imagined.

She's far too polite to say it, but you could argue that Natalie Portman also has a low boredom threshold. And *The Dark World* took her sliding all the way over it. That Alan Taylor-directed movie was Portman's second outing as Jane Foster, the human scientist who falls in love with Thor, and while it tries valiantly to give Portman something to do, she still spends a fair amount of time looking on as Hemsworth and Tom Hiddleston get to do all the cool stuff.

So it came as little surprise, then, when Portman was nowhere to be seen during *Ragnarok*. When Jane's name is mentioned, Thor reveals that their relationship is no more. "It was a mutual dumping," he says. Which seems like a very specific, and possibly even meta, take on the real-life situation. "That was me covering my ass," laughs Hemsworth, who actually improvised the line. "To be honest, I couldn't remember how they broke up, or who broke up with who."

Even so, Portman and Marvel Studios had clearly had a parting of the ways. From the outside, it seemed irrevocable. "It didn't feel that way to me," says Feige, however. "It was my impression that if it was an interesting role, she would be game."

Still, it was a shock to everybody but the small few assembled on stage at the San Diego Comic-Con in 2019 when Waititi, there to prime the pump for *Love And Thunder*, announced that not only would there be a female version of Thor appearing in the movie, but that she would be played by Portman, who strolled out to tumultuous cheers, and even briefly got to wield a replica of Mjolnir. "I'm now in the business of impressing my kids," laughs Portman. "I don't know if I can surpass this."

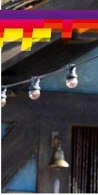
The female version of Thor — here called The Mighty Thor, to helpfully avoid confusion — first appeared in 2014, co-created by writer Jason Aaron and artist Russell Dauterman. Blessed with the same abilities as Thor and his hammer Mjolnir (which Thor at that point was no longer worthy of wielding), the identity of this new Goddess Of Thunder was kept under wraps for ages, before being revealed as — you get a No-Prize for guessing — Jane Foster.

It was a wildly popular arc, but Waititi didn't start *Love And Thunder* with Jane, or any female Thor, in mind. "When I was writing, it was like, 'Wouldn't it be cool and very unexpected to bring Jane back into the storyline?'" he says. So he made a trip to see Portman at her home and laid it on her. "It wasn't completely shocking that there was an idea," says Portman. "But it was fully exciting that she becomes The Mighty Thor. It felt like something new in the way of making this type of movie, and what exactly I was going to get to do."

Love And Thunder isn't driven by the question of the new Thor's identity. Instead, the movie's journey into mystery comes from finding out how and why Jane got her hands on Mjolnir. In the comics, wielding the weapon gave her the strength to battle cancer. "It's quite accurate to many aspects of the comic," teases Feige. "One of my favourite parts of the movie is the turn that Taika does, between fun rock and roll and what Jane is doing. It's the kind of turn that only Taika can do, to navigate the comedic and the tragic so close together."

One more low boredom threshold to go. This one belongs to Christian Bale. It's been a decade since the British actor played Christopher Nolan's Batman for a third and final time, after which Bale bailed on comic-book films and caped crusaders, and hadn't exactly been driven to keep track of the latest developments in that arena. "When I joined this, Taika said to me, 'What do you know about the Marvel Universe?'" says Bale, getting the MCU's name wrong off the bat. "I said, 'I saw one of the films where there was a big bloke looking for stones.'"

So he wasn't itching to get back, instead keeping himself occupied with intense dramas, character studies and the odd Oscar nomination. But when Waititi was looking for someone to play *Love And Thunder*'s villain, the outrageously named Gorr The God Butcher, Bale was top of his list. "I never thought he would put on prosthetics, but Christian does not disappoint," says Waititi. (Tessa Thompson calls Gorr "my favourite Marvel villain of all time", by the way.) "The challenges for Thor are really hard to come up with each time," continues the director. "'Oh, this villain is even stronger than this other villain,' and that was supposed to be the strongest villain! But Gorr was really cool to me."



A super-powerful super-zealot, Gorr has become furious with deities following a past tragedy. So he decides to punish them for their sins. Greek, Roman, Asgardian — for Gorr, the only good god is a dead god. "Gorr talks about this idea of what it's like to be a god," says Waititi. "For us humans, we look around the world at a lot of shit that goes down. Where are the gods? Do gods exist anymore? Are they important?"

Gorr gave Bale his first real experience of shooting against blue-screen ("It's a bit monotonous"), and a heavy make-up job that reimagines the character from his truly alien, facially tentacled appearance in the comics. "They sent me some images and I thought, 'No, that can't happen,'" deadpans Bale. "'I'm 48. No, that's not happening.'"

Instead, Bale drew inspiration from Chris Cunningham's black-and-white music video for Aphex Twin's 'Come To Daddy', in which a bunch of kids with Aphex Twin's face terrorise a council estate. And, naturally, one of history's most heinous dictators. "Basically it's like, if Stalin was a grieving father," he says. "I'm assuming it's going to be a PG-13, but it would probably have to be an R to incorporate all the things that we did." Which gives you some indication of what the Thors are up against, as Waititi raises the stakes and turns the emotional screw.

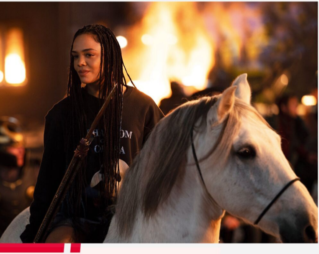
While the director wanted *Love And Thunder* to be every bit as bizarre, offbeat and comedic as *Ragnarok*, he also recognises that man cannot live by wisecracks alone. "I wanted to lean in a little more with the drama in this film, and with some of the more emotional aspects," he says. "In my films, I really love when people laugh and cry, and I don't think people cried in *Ragnarok*." *Love And Thunder* may remedy that, according to Thompson. "As irreverent a filmmaker as Taika is, all of his films have a tremendous amount of heart," she says. "This film has maybe more than we've seen elsewhere in the MCU."

At the film's emotional centre is that rekindled relationship between Thor and Jane. "Sparks are going to fly," hints Portman, mindful of violating her first heavy-duty NDA in almost a decade. Hemsworth is willing to go a little further. "In this space of self-discovery and figuring out who he is," he says, "all of a sudden Thor sees someone dressed like him, that happens to be his ex-girlfriend. That throws a spanner in the works as far as his reconstruction of self goes."

You could argue that this is self-love on an epic scale, but Waititi has loftier goals in mind. "I'm trying to make something which touches on this idea of love in all of the different ways that can exist," he says. "That manifests in different ways — Feige says there's a bonkers subplot in which

Top to bottom: Christian Bale as Gorr The God Butcher; Getting reacquainted — "Sparks are going to fly," promises Portman; King Valkyrie and her trusty Valkyrie Steed.

Left: Thor aboard his Viking longboat. **Below:** The God Of Thunder and his mighty Stormbreaker return to action.



an unexpected love triangle forms. Not between Thor, Jane and, say, Thompson's Valkyrie, or even Waititi himself as Thor's rocky friend, Korg, but between Thor and his two enchanted weapons. "There's an undercurrent of jealousy," laughs Feige. "When The Mighty Thor and Mjolnir show up, Thor's eyes start to be diverted away from Stormbreaker, and Stormbreaker's not that pleased about it." That's more than just a spanner in the works.

Assuming that Gorr The God Butcher ends up as Gorr The God-Butchered, and that both Thors live to fight another day, where Marvel takes these characters next is anyone's guess. "The end of this film is so cool, so satisfying and so unexpected for this character," teases Waititi. Hemsworth has reached the end of the road, contractually speaking, but seems game to carry on, as long as Thor can be reinvented and reinvigorated every time. "I'd like to exit before an audience says, 'We're sick of you,'" he says. "But if we come up with an idea that's surprising and new to an audience, I'm always open to the conversation."

As for Waititi, an ever-packed dance card that includes a *Star Wars* movie, an *Akira* remake and more could preclude him from telling the continuing adventures of Asgard's favourite son. But if he does make another Thor movie, one thing's for sure: it won't be boring. ●

THOR: LOVE AND THUNDER IS IN CINEMAS FROM 7 JULY

NEARLY 30 YEARS AFTER UNLEASHING HIS EPIC CRIME DRAMA *HEAT*, DIRECTOR **MICHAEL MANN** IS BACK WITH A SEQUEL — IN BOOK FORM.

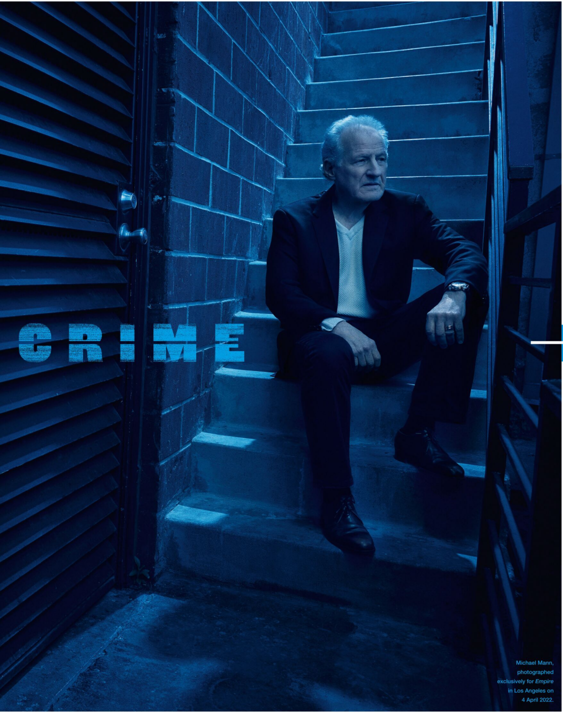
SCENE OF THE

HE TELLS US WHY THESE CHARACTERS ARE A LIFELONG OBSESSION… AND WHY NOT EVEN DEATH CAN KEEP THEM DOWN

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

PORTRAITS **ART STREIBER**

CRIME



Michael Mann, photographed exclusively for *Empire* in Los Angeles on 4 April 2022.

A COP AND A THIEF SIT DOWN FOR A CUP of coffee at a local deli. They've been circling each other, professionally speaking, ever since the cop saw the thief just walk away from a complex score he had been setting up because he felt something was off (he was correct). They exchange chit-chit, small talk, wary of each other yet still keen to gain the psychological upper hand. They know that this is only going to end one way: with one of them dead by the other's hand. Yet there remains a lingering feeling: perhaps, in another life, they could have been best friends, brothers, soulmates, even. In another life.

Shortly thereafter, the thief lies dead at the hands of the cop. The year is 1963. The place is Chicago. The thief's name is Neil McCauley.

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MICHAEL MANN STILL REMEMBERS THE first time he heard that name. As a matter of fact, he heard it from the man who killed McCauley.

Charles 'Chuck' Adamson was a former Chicago PD detective who Mann, in search of

Clockwise from left: *Heat*'s iconic coffee-shop scene; Robert De Niro and Michael Mann between takes; Al Pacino as Lieutenant Vincent Hanna.

Alamy, Photofest

authenticity for his big-screen directorial debut *Thief*, had hired as a technical adviser/cast member (Adamson is the cop who berates James Caan during an interrogation scene). One day when they were working on the film in the dying embers of the 1970s, Mann was grilling Adamson about war stories from his days as a cop. "I said, 'Tell me the definition of a crew that's really professional and highline,'" remembers Mann, talking exclusively to *Empire* from his LA office. Without a moment's hesitation, Adamson dropped Neil McCauley's name and, without knowing it, sparked in Mann an obsession that continues to flicker almost five decades on.

Adamson told Mann about how McCauley had first come to his attention, when Adamson and his men had got wind of a major upcoming score at a big department store. "'We were inside, waiting for them to come in,'" Mann recalls Adamson saying, "'and on the way in [McCauley's crew] see one vehicle that didn't belong in the parking lot, and they walked away and never came back.'" In other words, McCauley felt the heat around the corner, and walked away in 30 seconds flat.

Adamson continued, talking of how that ignited his pursuit of McCauley, and of how a chance encounter one day brought him face to face with his quarry in a parking lot. "Charlie was dropping off his cleaning and he sees Neil McCauley pulling in," says Mann. "They look at each other and Charlie's got his hand on his gun. What's going to happen? Charlie says, 'Hey, come on, I'll buy you a cup of coffee.'" And he did. The two talked, even bonded a little, recognising in the other a kindred spirit. They parted, having established a connection of grudging respect. The next time the two men ran into each other was the last time Neil McCauley ever ran into anyone; Adamson shot him dead after a grocery-store robbery went wrong.

Mann was so inspired by these tales of McCauley, the focused yet fatally flawed thief, that he immediately began work on a mammoth screenplay into which he crammed Adamson's anecdotes, yet broadened them, deepened them, until it became much more than a story of cops and robbers. It became an epic treatise on love, life, death, drive, determination, existentialism, romance, and why we do the things we do. It became — after a brief and unfortunate sojourn where Mann turned approximately 40 per cent of it into the little-seen and ill-fated TV pilot *L.A. Takedown* — the masterpiece of Mann's career. It became *Heat*, with its legendary and long-awaited pairing of Al Pacino (as Vincent Hanna, a cop based in part on Adamson) and Robert De Niro (as McCauley); with its all-timer of a shootout; and with its most iconic scene, a Manned-up version of that coffee-shop chat between Adamson and McCauley which, more than anything, had piqued Mann's interest. "This is not the way drama works," Mann says of his reaction to that story. "It's not the way fiction works. We think we have to resolve contradiction. Bullshit. Things aren't binary. Sometimes things which happen to be in opposition to each other are both true. And that attracted me because it's authentic. That's the real genesis of *Heat*."

After *Heat* came out in 1995, Mann turned his attention to other things. Films like *The Insider*, *Ali*, *Collateral*, *Public Enemies* and *Miami Vice*, the big-screen version of the TV show he had turned into a huge hit in the '80s (and for which Chuck Adamson had written several episodes). All of which cemented his reputation as one of American cinema's greatest visual stylists. ›

But there was something about *Heat* that Mann couldn't shake. Which is why, in a late-career swerve, he's bringing us *Heat 2* in an entirely unexpected format. A novel.

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"TOLD YOU I'M NEVER GOING BACK."

Those were Neil McCauley's last words in *Heat*, uttered as he lies dying, bleeding out from the four holes freshly put in him by Hanna at the end of their cat-and-mouse chase on the airfields of LAX. For years, Mann took those words as gospel any time the merest thought of revisiting *Heat* flitted through his mind. "If anybody asked me, I'd say, 'Yeah, that'd be great, but how can I? Because Neil McCauley dies,'" says Mann. "It was always attractive to try and do more with *Heat*, but it took a long time to figure out how to do it — how to finesse the fact that McCauley is dead at the end."

The impetus for what would become *Heat 2* came when Mann started looking at *Heat* for a 4K re-release about four years ago. Mann is not one for half-assing things. When it came to the approval process, rather than just sticking the movie on in the background and absent-mindedly looking up at the screen every now and again to mumble his assent, Mann went through the movie frame by frame with the kind of forensic attention to detail he's brought to all his movies. Yes, even *The Keep*. "That probably revived all kinds of sensory ideas about, 'Wouldn't it be great to bring on *Heat 2*?' Then the idea occurred to me: here's how a *Heat 2* story could tell itself."

The how, we'll get to. Why, in his first dalliance with these characters in 27 years, has Mann chosen to do so in the form of a novel? Did *Heat 2* begin life as a screenplay? "No, a long time ago I wanted to be a novelist," says Mann. "I was an English Lit major and I got a C or a D in Creative Writing." It's hard to imagine Michael Mann getting a C or a D in anything, frankly. "I also got a D in Television Writing," he laughs. Yikes. To that teacher, eternal shame.

It seems there's always been a novel lurking within Mann. His finest films have always benefitted from a novelistic approach, digging deep into his characters' backgrounds and psychology. "The ability to which you can deep-dive into the internal world is fascinating," he says, "and you can do that best in a novel. I try to evoke that experience in the films I make, to locate the audience within the internal world of a character. The novel form allows me an even greater arena."

A couple of years ago, Mann set up his own imprint, Michael Mann Books, in conjunction with Shane Salerno's The Story Factory (an independent group of authors, including Don Winslow and Adrian McKinty), with the idea of producing a series of books, some of which Mann would write or co-write (*Heat 2* is co-written by acclaimed crime novelist Meg Gardiner). The first project which, according to Mann, was "about a major organised crime family in Chicago in the 1950s and early '60s, which is something I still want to do," swiftly got back-burnered when he suddenly cracked the code for more *Heat*.

He did so by taking a page out of Francis Ford Coppola's book. Like *The Godfather Part II*, *Heat 2* (admittedly not the most elegant title, but perhaps preferable to any number of cheesy re-heated puns) lays out an exciting future for its chief protagonists, Vincent Hanna and McCauley's right-hand man, Chris Shiherlis (played by Val Kilmer in *Heat*), in the aftermath, both immediate and long-term, of the events of the film. But it also probes the past as a means of illuminating its present, taking us back to the Chicago of 1988, where an ambitious and aggressive young cop by the name of Vincent Hanna is pursuing a ruthless crew whose leader, unbeknownst to Hanna, has brought him into direct conflict with a certain Neil McCauley. To say more would be to spoil it, but let's just say that the events that take place in this time period find McCauley, in particular, in a very different place from the closed-off pro Hanna meets in Los Angeles in 1995. "Origins are really important," says Mann. "How did Neil McCauley become institutionalised? How did he have that peculiarly linear philosophical perspective on life, and how to be in the world? How did he acquire his perspectives about not having any emotional attachments, having a strict risk-versus-reward attitude on life?"

Remarkably, Mann has known the answer to those questions for years. "Typically, when I write a film, I have to know everything about a character," he says. "I had so much material we had prepared so thoroughly for *Heat*. I save everything. For some sick reason I preserve all this, and have massive archives, for the benefit of people who own warehouses, I guess."

But if the past was already boxed off (literally), that couldn't be said for the future.

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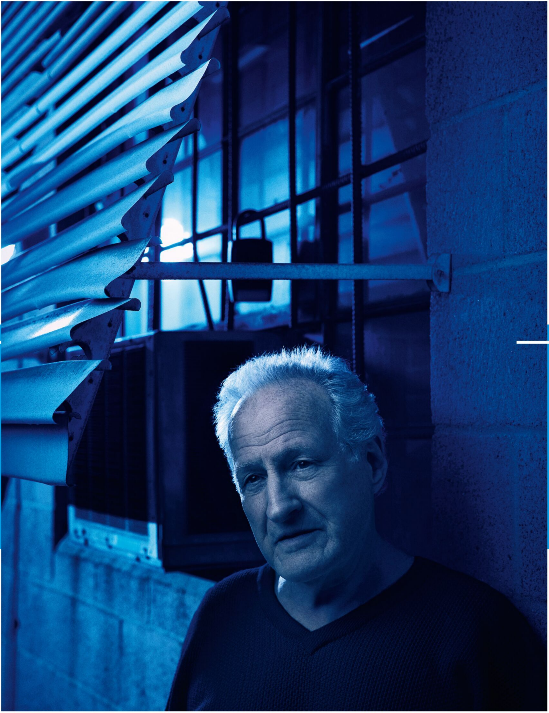
"I'M A NEEDLE STARTING AT ZERO," McCauley tells his lover, Eady (Amy Brenneman), in *Heat*, and when it came to plotting the paths taken by Hanna and Shiherlis and some of the other survivors of *Heat*, that was very much the case. If Mann had one rule, it was that he didn't want to repeat himself. "That's what's exciting to me," he says. "To be at the frontier, where rules aren't formed yet, is an exciting space. I didn't want to go to, 'Here's

›

Clockwise from above: De Niro as Neil McCauley; Mann has co-written new novel *Heat 2* with author Meg Gardiner; The mother of all shoot-outs part one;... and part two; Gunning for success — the director demonstrates his firing technique.



more.' That's not really interesting."

As a result, while *Heat 2* isn't short on action, don't expect a version of the gold-standard shootout from the 1995 movie, or a recreation of the coffee-shop scene, only this time with Hanna and Shiherlis talking about barbecues and baseball games. Instead, Mann shifts the focus, and widens the aperture, taking a story that was already mythic into the realms of the epic, sending his characters to places as far-flung as Paraguay and Mexico, before bringing everything back to the streets of LA for an epic showdown that ties various strands together. "The future was all newly invented from places I've been and people I've met and things I've seen," says Mann, although the novel's future is also our past, with the bulk of the action taking place in the year 2000. "The heart of it is the redefinition of Chris Shiherlis, by himself, both as a partner with Charlene, and a partner with his crew."

Hanna is still a huge part of the unfolding story of *Heat 2*, but there's no doubt that Shiherlis is the book's main character. He finds himself in an unexpected position, working in security for an Asian company operating on the edges of the law in Paraguay, developing a new skillset as he tries to battle with both a desire to return to his family in America, and the notion that McCauley, his brother-in-arms, should be avenged in some way. In *Heat*, Shiherlis is given plenty of screen time, allowing Kilmer to make much of his natural charisma, but — apart from brief snapshots into his crumbling marriage and the thousand emotions that run through his eyes when wife Charlene (Ashley Judd) tips him off about the presence of the police at the end — he's very much

Clockwise from left: Mann says *Heat 2* is "totally planned to be a movie"; Pacino and Mann discuss a scene; De Niro with Val Kilmer as Chris Shiherlis; Mann on set with Pacino and De Niro.

Alamy, Photofest

an unknown quantity. That changes in the novel. "He really comes into his own as a character," acknowledges Mann. "Self-actualisation is an overused, hackneyed term, but it's very, very accurate. You do it yourself and you become the actual self that you have the innate potential to be. That's exactly what Chris Shiherlis is."

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IT'S GOING TO BE A HELL OF A ROLE FOR whoever ends up playing Shiherlis. Because, even though *Heat 2* didn't start as a back-door pilot, somewhere along the way Mann has decided that it's too cinematic to keep away from the cinema. Unless something goes catastrophically wrong, there will be a movie version of *Heat 2* and it will be written and directed by Michael Mann. "It's totally planned to be a movie," he says, matter-of-factly. "Is it a modest movie? No. Is it a very expensive series? No. It's going to be one large movie."

Mann attributes the sudden heat around *Heat* to the size of its cultural footprint. When the movie opened in 1995, it took in a respectable $67 million at the box office, with audiences intrigued by the teaming of De Niro and Pacino for the first time (they never share the screen in *The Godfather Part II*). It was well-reviewed and well-liked, but when the Oscars rolled around in March of 1996, *Heat*, ludicrously, didn't receive a single nomination. In the years since, though, its reputation has only been enhanced, and it's now widely thought of as a classic. Christopher Nolan worships at its altar — *The Dark Knight* is basically *Heat* with superheroes — while Pacino's feral performance has memeified, if not mummified, the movie in memory.

"It's sustained in culture," says Mann of *Heat*'s impact. "It's known. I could delude myself into thinking that the whole world is familiar with it, but when you check out its prominence in home vid for over 20 years, this thing really has legs. People are still watching it, people are still talking about it. It's a brand. It's kind of a *Heat* universe, in a way. And that certainly justifies a very large, very ambitious movie."

Which raises the issue of casting. De Niro is 78. Pacino is 82. And while actors not exactly being in the full-bloom of spring chickendom didn't give Martin Scorsese pause when he made *The Irishman*, de-ageing isn't on Mann's agenda. Also, there's Kilmer, who, while only in his early sixties, has battled cancer in recent years, the effects of which meant his recent cameo in *Top Gun: Maverick* was largely silent. So, is Mann's only recourse to recast? "I love those guys, but they'd have to be six years younger than they were in *Heat*," chuckles Mann of De Niro and Pacino. "So, 'yes' is the answer." (Pacino — joking or otherwise — has suggested the much-too-young Timothée Chalamet play Hanna.)

At 79, Mann is no spring chicken himself, but as Ridley Scott is also proving, you're only as old as your material. It's been a sparse few years for Mann as a film director — he's about to start filming *Ferrari*, which will be the first movie he's made since 2015's absorbing but ignored *Blackhat* — which might explain the gusto with which he's throwing himself into this return to *Heat*. There's more to come, too, with work underway on a follow-up novel. "There's a whole new world that's out there after the end of this book," teases Mann. He's not done with Neil McCauley, or the man who killed him, just yet. ●

***HEAT 2* IS PUBLISHED ON 18 AUGUST, THROUGH HARPERCOLLINS**

LIVING THE DREAM

WORDS DAN JOLIN

AFTER THREE DECADES OF FAILED ATTEMPTS, NEIL GAIMAN'S SEEMINGLY UNFILMABLE FANTASY-EPIC SAGA *THE SANDMAN* IS FINALLY MATERIALISING ON OUR SCREENS. *EMPIRE* REVEALS HOW IT BECAME A REALITY

IN 1990, Neil Gaiman strode into a meeting with Warner Bros. and instructed them not to adapt his comic. “Please don’t make a *Sandman* movie right now. Just… don’t,” he asked. He was 29. Lisa Henson, vice president of production, was stunned. “Nobody’s ever come into my office before and asked me *not* to make a movie,” she told him. But he wouldn’t budge.

The Portsmouth-born comic-book author explained that he was so embroiled in his long-form creative vision (the series, co-created with artists Sam Kieth and Mike Dringenberg, would run to 75 issues), a movie would be an unwelcome distraction. His publisher, DC Comics, had sent him to meet Henson, but, he thought, this was the wrong time for an adaptation. A terrible idea. “Just let me do my thing,” he said to Henson. “Okay,” she shrugged, “we won’t make a *Sandman* movie!”

During the following decades, there were further attempts to turn Gaiman’s spiralling metaphysical masterpiece — concerning the travails of Morpheus, aka Dream, the gothy personification of the universe’s subconscious — into popcorn entertainment. Director Roger Avary had a try that stalled in 1996, before infamous producer Jon Peters got his hands on it (“There were scripts with giant mechanical spiders that made no sense,” shudders Gaiman of the Peters era).

Later, James Mangold came close to realising an HBO series. Then executive producer David S. Goyer, a fan of *The Sandman* since Issue 1, came even closer with a movie script written by Jack Thorne that Gaiman describes as “fabulous”. But still *The Sandman* slipped through its adaptors’ fingers. It was just too, well, *much*.

“*The Sandman* is a story about storytelling,” says Allan Heinberg, co-writer of *Wonder Woman* and such TV shows as *Sex And The City* and *Gilmore Girls*. He discovered the comic in college, and it inspired him to pivot from acting to writing. “It is such an inclusive story, in that it incorporates mythologies and folktales and Shakespeare and Chaucer and all of these things.” It takes us back in time, visits Hell, guest-stars Norse gods and weaves in Greek myth, as well as introducing Dream’s ‘Endless’ siblings: Destiny, Desire, Despair, Delirium… Plus his cute older sister, Death.

It’s not surprising Hollywood couldn’t digest Gaiman’s graphic-novel game-changer. “It’s always been a bit of a feathered fish,” laughs Goyer, whose comic-book previous includes the *Dark Knight* trilogy and *Man Of Steel*. “It’s not easily categorisable and Hollywood hates things you can’t categorise.”

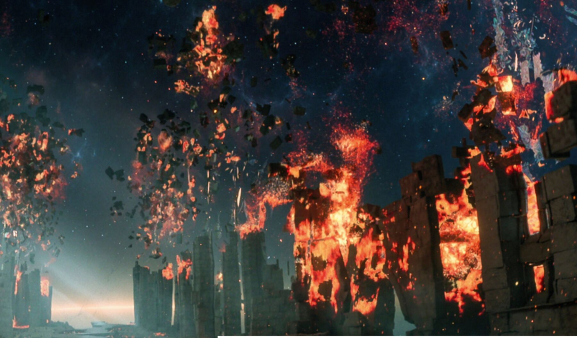
For so long, successfully adapting *Sandman* was like dreaming the impossible dream. So how did they make it a reality?

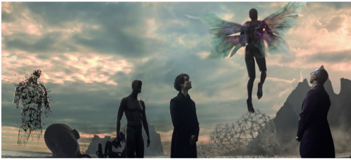
THEY MADE THE CREATOR A SHOWRUNNER

While developing the Jack Thorne version in 2013, Goyer suggested something nobody had suggested before: bringing Neil Gaiman on as an executive producer. “It was flabbergasting that no-one had ever thought to invite him into the process,” says Goyer, who points out that by this point Gaiman had written movies (including Robert Zemeckis’ *Beowulf*), so he was hardly an industry ingénue. When Warner Bros. revived the project in 2019 and started pitching it to networks, Goyer gave one condition for his involvement: “Not only do I want Neil to be an executive producer, I want him to co-write the pilot.”

Encouraged by Gaiman’s success with the *Good Omens* TV series (based on the 1990 novel he co-wrote with Terry Pratchett), the studio agreed. “All of a sudden, instead of [just] being the guy who wrote the comic, I was an established and successful showrunner,” says Gaiman. “For 30 years I’d refused to come on board. Even for the adaptations I’d liked the look of, because I knew the only power I had [as the creator] was the power of walking away. I’d been frustrated with *American Gods* [the Amazon Prime series based on Gaiman’s 2001 novel], where my notes on scripts would be ignored. But finally I was in control, and finally we were at a point where I had the power to bring into existence the kind of *Sandman* I would like to see on screen.”

Goyer describes the showrunning triumvirate





Clockwise from top: Welcome to Hell; Dreams created by Morpheus come to life; Creator Neil Gaiman at work; Boyd Holbrook as The Corinthian; Johanna Constantine (Jenna Coleman) and Morpheus (Tom Sturridge).

— Goyer, Heinberg and Gaiman — as “the Three Musketeers”, but Boyd Holbrook (*Narcos*, *Logan*), whom they would cast as charming, eyeball-eating nightmare The Corinthian, is more illustrative. “Allan was boots-on-the-ground, dealing with all the triage of scheduling,” he says. “David was the man behind the curtain that Allan could rely on. And Neil was very much like Dream — just waiting in some ethereal place if you needed to call on him.”

But even with Gaiman on board, they still faced the show’s greatest challenge: finding the real Dream (if real is the right word).

THEY FOUND THE IDEAL MORPHEUS

How do you cast a protagonist who is as old as existence and more powerful and unknowable than a god? Yet also more relatable than he

Left: Morpheus and Desire (Mason Alexander Park). **Right:** Morpheus and his faithful raven Matthew (Patton Oswalt) visit Lucifer (Gwendoline Christie) in Hell. **Below, from top:** Vivienne Acheampong as Lucienne; Asim Chaudhry as Abel; Morpheus takes a walk with Death (Kirby Howell-Baptiste).

himself would admit? Especially after he's humiliatingly captured by an Aleister Crowley-ish occultist (played by Charles Dance) and imprisoned for over a century. Heinberg describes Morpheus as a "hero who is trying hard to remain emotionally detached, so he doesn't get swallowed up by the collective unconscious that he embodies." Not the most straightforward role to fill.

"Casting Morpheus was absolutely the hardest part of making the show," says Goyer. "I don't even know how many people auditioned. Could have been over 700." They wanted an accomplished actor, but not too big a name (past potential Dreams included Johnny Depp, Benedict Cumberbatch and Tom Hiddleston). "Morpheus is not a superhero," continues Goyer, "but if you look to the casting of Superman, it's helpful that you don't cast an actor with too much baggage; you don't want someone who's bigger than the story."

Gaiman himself had very specific criteria for Morpheus. "Can do Shakespeare and has good cheekbones," he laughs. But also, he adds, "We needed somebody who could be vulnerable while never being human." After a search which took in "people from so many cultures and so many ethnicities from all around the world," Gaiman says, they ended up settling on one of the first actors they'd seen: 36-year-old Londoner Tom Sturridge.

"If we didn't get Morpheus right, the show would be a failure," says Goyer. "And I think with Tom, we got it right. It was obvious to Neil, Allan and myself that he was Morpheus." Even though Sturridge hadn't, at first, read the comic books. "The casting process was an incredibly long one, so it gave me the opportunity to read everything over and over to the point where it got into my blood and bones," the actor tells *Empire*. "I am now *Sandman*'s biggest fan."

THEY WAITED FOR THE WORLD TO CATCH UP

A huge sense of responsibility to all the comic's numerous fans is felt by *The Sandman*'s showrunners, but they are confident the faithful will be satisfied by the show's fidelity to its source. "We all want to bring what we loved about the *Sandman* comics to the screen," says Heinberg. And that includes the title's surprising and admirable progressiveness, with it prominently featuring LGBTQ+ and BIPOC characters long before those initialisms existed.

"I love that we're in a time in which none of the stuff I did seems weird," grins Gaiman. "I love that I'm in a time when I can argue with people about casting a non-binary actor [Mason Alexander Park] as Desire, a part that was non-binary 35 years ago. I was surprised at how little we had to update."

On devouring *The Sandman*, Sturridge was struck by this aspect of Gaiman's storytelling. "What's so amazing is the diversity of experience that it describes, by which I mean there's an opportunity for everyone to find something for themselves inside it," he says. "Neil was way ahead of his time."

In keeping with this spirit, *The Sandman*'s vast array of supporting roles were approached with complete open-mindedness. Characters such as Morpheus' head librarian Lucien and paranormal investigator John Constantine were gender-flipped so they could be played by Vivienne

Acheampong and Jenna Coleman respectively.

So too was the small-but-key role of Lucifer Morningstar, the Devil, with whom Morpheus has to contend in the fourth episode. "Lucifer is this Bowie-esque creature in the comic book and I thought, 'Well, who is a bigger fucking rock star at the moment than Gwendoline Christie?'" says Heinberg. Christie was delighted by the idea, not least because it was so markedly different to the honourable and righteous knight Brienne in *Game Of Thrones*, which she'd just finished shooting.

"I was so thrilled Allan asked me to play Lucifer, because it is a grandiose part," she says. "There are few castings that can supersede that — maybe God, whatever that is! Also, it's fun to be awful." Although, Christie points out, the role has not technically been gender-flipped. "Neil clarified that Lucifer is a fallen angel, and that an angel doesn't have gender at all. And I can play androgynous. We know that from *Game Of Thrones*, due to the way I look. So I hope that has helped in the portrayal of the character."

Several other characters, meanwhile, are no longer Caucasian. For example, quarrelsome Biblical brothers Cain and Abel are played by Sanjeev Bhaskar and Asim Chaudhry, while Rose Walker is played by newcomer Kyo Ra. Most notable is Heinberg/Gaiman/Goyer's choice for Death, a fan favourite, who in the comics is depicted as an alabaster-skinned goth girl.

"My answer to anybody who asks, 'Why did you cast Kirby Howell-Baptiste, a Black woman, as Death?' is because I saw 800 auditions from women of every possible skin tone and every stage of gaminesqueness and she pulled it off," says Gaiman. "What she gives us is astonishing. It's magical. You're gonna fall in love with her."

Howell-Baptiste (formerly of *Killing Eve* and *The Good Place*) knew the character well, having read and loved the comic years earlier. "I took an incredible liking to the role of Death, because she was very different to anything I'd ever seen of that character before," she says. "It's not doom-and-gloom. It's not the Grim Reaper. She's a friend you're going on a journey with, from this life to the next. It was a humbling experience to play her."

Gaiman describes her scenes with Sturridge in Episode 6 as revealing a "loving sibling relationship. She puts up with Morpheus on a level that no other entity in the universe would be willing to." Just like every older sister to an anthropomorphic personification really should.

THEY FOUND THE PERFECT HOME

Heinberg primarily likes to define *The Sandman* as a relationship drama. "It's a story about a dysfunctional family," he says, referring to Morpheus and his Endless siblings. That is how he, Goyer and Gaiman pitched it to Netflix, who picked it up from Warner Bros. in June 2019. But he also recognises that it is "unlike anything you've ever seen before, and it isn't any one thing."

Sturridge points out that "the problem with trying to reduce *The Sandman* to cinematic length is you can only pick one story, and that doesn't do justice to what it is: a huge, sprawling, *soul* of a piece of literature."

Gaiman's material could never be satisfyingly compressed into movie form, even before trying to add in giant mechanical spiders. But, with the kind of long-form storytelling encouraged by Netflix, they "have the real estate to tell the story at the pace it requires," says Heinberg.

Even so, you'd imagine Netflix might request they rein it all in a bit. Not so, reveals Gaiman. "I've been around the block in Hollywood enough times to know it is very common for people to go, 'Hey, we love your pizza. The only thing wrong with it is that it is round and flat and covered in cheese and tomato sauce. Can you change those things?' So we made it clear to everybody that the pizza was the pizza."

THEY COULD FINALLY BUILD THOSE OUT-THERE REALMS

Netflix was also willing to stump up for the kind of production budgets that other platforms baulked at — and which had contributed to the persistent untenability of an adaptation over the years.

"Nobody had the ability to make the things [the comic] was asking them to," says Gaiman. "We're very lucky that Netflix and Warners were prepared to spend the amount of money that it costs to get something like this made."

Aside from allowing some big names to guest-star (joining Charles Dance are Joely Richardson, Stephen Fry, Mark Hamill, and David Thewlis as "a worse supervillain than anybody who's ever appeared on any Marvel movie screen," Gaiman promises), this meant they had the resources to visualise fantastical environments previously only visualisable by the comics' artists. Such as Morpheus' realm The Dreaming, which Sturridge describes as "a space I would equate to the best parts of Hogwarts, Narnia and Middle-earth." Or Hell, which was constructed in Shepperton. "The fire was hot and real and in your face, and the murals of orgies of the damned were touchable," says Sturridge. "I've never experienced anything on this scale."

Holbrook agrees. "There were some pretty grandiose locations. You felt, 'Wow, they're putting a lot of backing behind this. They've got the top team.' It's taken 30 years for a reason, to get to the right levels for this to be done."

Creating and populating the worlds of *The Sandman* was "a Herculean enterprise on every level across the board for every department," says Heinberg. But it had to be done. They couldn't start small, Goyer says. "We needed to show the audience that this epic wouldn't just be constrained to a single reality."

Yet what we get to see in the first season is only the tip of the dreamberg. There are another 59 issues to be adapted (not including the 2013 prequel series *Overture*), comprising a further five storylines (not including several short stories) that intertwine into one huge arc. "We have many, many volumes of *Sandman* we would love to adapt," says Heinberg. "Our hope is that enough people love Season 1 enough so that we can."

And even if they don't, it is hard to imagine the show's creator having any regrets. "We're bringing it to the screen with no compromises," Gaiman concludes. "There are no apologies. There's no feeling of, 'Oh, I wish we had more money to do this. I wish we had more time.' I'm proud of it. I love what we're making.'" It is, quite simply, a dream come true. ●

***THE SANDMAN* IS ON NETFLIX FROM 5 AUGUST**

BACK IN BUSIN

DECADES AGO, TWO NOBODIES CALLED **ROGER AVARY** AND **QUENTIN TARANTINO** WORKED AT VIDEO ARCHIVES, A VHS EMPORIUM IN LA'S MANHATTAN BEACH. NOW, AS DEFINITE SOMEBODIES, THE OLD FRIENDS WITH A NEW PODCAST REUNITE TO TELL *EMPIRE* HOW THEY'RE REKINDLING THOSE MAGNETIC-TAPE GLORY DAYS

WORDS **NICK DE SEMLYEN**

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CALL IT A TRUE BROMANCE.

In 1985, Quentin Tarantino, a fizzy-brained film-geek in his early twenties who loved to stalk the aisles of video stores hunting for something he hadn't seen, met a clerk of one of those stores named Roger Avary. They hit it off. And so began a magical period in both their lives. Later, Avary would write and direct the likes of *Killing Zoe* and *The Rules Of Attraction*; Tarantino, nine revered classics; together, they dreamed up the screenplay for *Pulp Fiction*. They found kinship, though, at Video Archives, where they both ended up working, and where spirited tussles over movie minutiae could break out at the smallest provocation.

The two fell out of contact for a while, but have reignited their friendship, to the extent that they're starting a podcast named after said store. For each episode, Tarantino and Avary watch vintage videotapes together, then pore over the ins, outs and reverse dolly zooms, just like the old days. And in an epic video chat with *Empire*, their shared enthusiasm for all things celluloid burns so bright, it almost melts our computer. In his home in Israel, Tarantino sits in front of a *Dirty Harry* poster. Avary, meanwhile, in LA, has crammed shelves behind him, boasting a Totoro toy, Salvador Dalí trinkets and a tiny violin in a tiny violin case, an item Avary claims once belonged to a leprechaun. "It'll take years, but he's gonna get to you one of these days," Tarantino laughs of the object he hasn't seen for decades. "And that's the way you die!"

In-jokes abound, and so does wanton geekery. Hold on tight...

Quentin, is it true you own the entirety of the Video Archives collection? I read somewhere that's 80,000 tapes.

Avary: It's closer to 100,000!

Tarantino: I don't know how many tapes I have, because I can't count that high. And I have no reason to. But I have the store. Other than the X-rated section, I have the store.

Avary: Quentin bought the shelves, the signage and everything. And in his house he's rebuilt the store, Video Archives. So when we're recording, we're actually inside the store. And it's a weird flashback for me, looking at these tapes I've handled a million times. A very surreal, full-circle experience, to land back and to be doing with Quentin exactly what we did back in the day: just dig in and talk about movies.

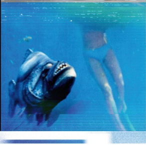
Tarantino: Okay, but let me preface... It's not like I worked in a bowling alley, and I'm some weirdo who rebuilt a bowling alley in his house because he wants to hold onto his youth. I have the shelves because I have the tapes, and I had to have someplace to put them. And when I put these two rooms in the house, it was 1997. It wasn't the most ridiculous thing in the world in 1997 to have a video room!

Avary: It's not even the most ridiculous thing now. I think it's a magical thing. For me, it's like going into some kind of wonderland. Like being able to touch the ecstasies of my youth.

It's easy to assume that you guys have seen every film there is. But The Video Archives Podcast includes titles you're watching for the first time.

Tarantino: Well, we wanted an excuse to go through the Video Archives collection. But also, I was bored about the idea of talking about movies I've seen a zillion times. I mean, especially in the '80s, I paid to see shit that I didn't even like at movie theatres two or three times! But in the last 20 years, when I'm watching movies with friends, I'm always watching older movies that I've seen before.

This page, clockwise from above: Co-writers Quentin Tarantino and Roger Avary accept the Oscar for Best Original Screenplay for *Pulp Fiction* on 27 March 1995; *Demonoid* (1981); *The Loved One* (1965); *Pulp Fiction* (1994); *Piranha* (1978); *Un Chien Andalou*, aka *An Andalusian Dog* (1929).



Above: *True Romance* (1993). The Tony Scott-directed film was inspired by Tarantino's time at Video Archives. **Below:** Roger Moore in *Moonraker* (1979).

Avary: So you get to watch it through their eyes.
Tarantino: This year was the year I got sick of that. So I always wanted to get one that Roger hasn't seen and one that I haven't seen.
Avary: I'm actually startled, because we've gotten so many layers of the onion deep into the Archives collection…
Tarantino: And we haven't even broke the surface!
Avary: We haven't even broke the surface. I feel like every movie you've chosen has been a great experience, even if the movie was a little rough. I'm like this explorer with Shackleton on our way into the Arctic to make discoveries. And sometimes you've got to lock your ship into the ice to get deeper into the Arctic, and you've got to kill your dogs and eat them. (*Laughs*) Sometimes it's not a pleasant experience to do discovery. Some of our crew members got frostbite and died.
Tarantino: But the ground got covered!

The films you dissect are a varied bunch, including *Demonoid* — a Mexican horror about an evil severed hand — Joe Dante's *Piranha*, and the Roger Moore Bond film *Moonraker*.
Avary: That's a movie I hated back in the day. But Roger the elderly statesman sees something new in it. It really spoke to me. Quentin wasn't touched the way I was.
Tarantino: We played [the podcast episode] for my editor, Fred Raskin, and he said the funniest thing he's heard this year was me biting my tongue and letting Roger wax on poetic about *Moonraker*. The silence was deafening.
Avary: I even appreciate the double-taking pigeon.
Tarantino: I'm actually a big Roger Moore fan. In *ffolkes* or the TV show *Maverick* or any episode of *The Saint*, he's my man. My least favourite thing of Roger Moore is his James Bond movies.

What is it about VHS as a format that you love?
Tarantino: VHS has always gotten a really bad rap, quality-wise. But one of the things that's great about video cassettes, and Roger deals with that in a big way when it comes to the reel changes in [Tony Richardson's] *The Loved One*, is 99 per cent, if not 100 per cent of every video cassette you ever watched was struck from a print. A 35mm or 16mm print. It's not something that's smoothed out, that has no life whatsoever.
Avary: There's also the durability of VHS. For example, Quentin has a favourite tape that he loaned to a friend of ours. The guy took it to his house and never returned it, which is always a problem. So Quentin found himself over there at the house. Quentin, you can probably tell the story better than I can. You were there.
Tarantino: I'll even tell you what the tape was. It was the Christian Blackwood documentary *Roger Corman: Hollywood's Wild Angel*.
Avary: Which is an important one!
Tarantino: It couldn't be more important to me. It was a film school reduced to a video cassette. So another film-student guy I was friends with, I lend him the tape. Six months later, I'm at his place and I'm sitting on his couch and I look down at my feet. And he had lost a leg of his couch and was using my video cassette — my precious Christian Blackwood film-school-in-a-box video cassette — to hold up his fucking couch! I was almost too embarrassed for him to be mad about it. Anyway, I took it home, and it played fucking great.
Avary: Not only that, but the other day Quentin told me the story, threw me the tape, we popped it in and we watched a little. It still works.
Tarantino: There are some tapes from, like, ›

...they'r
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1993
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Dogs

1979 that we watch. Nineteen-seventy-fucking-nine. Try that with your fucking DVD!

Did you guys meet at Video Archives?
Avary: Actually, just a little bit before. Quentin was, of course, checking out every video store in the area — and in the greater LA area, by the way. So it was really destiny that he would come walking in through the door.
Tarantino: Roger was there from the very beginning. I was a sleazy customer that got a job.
Avary: Actually, he was the highly movie-literate guy who could challenge anybody. He's the guy who comes walking into the store and drops an atom bomb on you. Quentin is a voracious reader, you know? And he would do things like pretend to be writing a book, then call some director and go in and do an interview. You've *got* to hire that guy. It was like a gunslinger walking into a bar and saying, "I'm gonna be your guy."
Tarantino: I'd spent my whole life alone, filling my head. And finally, I had a place where I could use all that stuff.
Avary: There were a bunch of guys there, all of whom were experts in their own way. Guys like Stevo [Polyi], Russell Vossler and 'Unruly' Julie [McLean]. Everybody had their super-strength. I might not know all the Disney movies, but, you know, Stevo is going to be able to double down on *That Darn Cat!*.
Tarantino: Or *Snowball Express*. And Russell could tell you the name of every Robert McKimson-directed Looney Tunes cartoon. Roger was the horror guy, among other things.
Avary: Horror, science-fiction. It was cinema that pulled us together. It was the gravity that brought us together and the glue that held us together.

What was your favourite part of the job?
Tarantino: For me, not having to work for a living. Except for the fact that we were doing work — taking care of customers, processing tapes, putting tapes on the shelf — we were almost like a *Village Voice*. An underground newspaper, and we were the movie critics. The customers started really counting on us to help steer them. Now admittedly, the last two years, I got a little bored. I don't want to have to handpick every fucking movie and give everybody a spiel when they walk through the door. But the first three years, I thought it was amazing.
Avary: The store was like a clubhouse.
Tarantino: After we closed up [at night], we would watch a double-feature, or have a Jonathan Demme festival. We did that a lot. I mean, I took dates there and had sex in the X-rated section.
Avary: Our X-rated section, just FYI, was at the back of the store. There were these two saloon doors, and this long tunnel lit with blue-and-green neon. And this one wall full of porno tapes.
Tarantino: It was a great place to have sex!

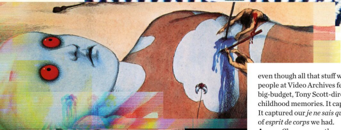
Is it true, Quentin, that you once had a romantic picnic in the parking lot?
Tarantino: Yeah, in the back parking lot. There was this one customer I liked and so I decided to do this grand romantic gesture. I did a whole picnic-basket, blanket thing. There's some famous picnic painting Russell kept referring to called 'Le Déjeuner Sur L'Herbe' [by Manet, 1863]. So he dubbed that scene (*in fancy French voice*), 'Le Déjeuner Sur Parking Lot'. (*Laughs*)

How about conflicts? Did arguments ever get physical?
Avary: I would never bring my fists up over a movie. However, it's fun to argue over them, as long as you keep an open mind.
Tarantino: I did not have that type of open mind in my twenties.
Avary: Neither did I.
Tarantino: I never got into a physical, 'punch a guy in the nose' fight over Brian De Palma. I came pretty fucking close. I came pretty close.
Avary: We were kind of dicks at the store, because customers would come in and if they couldn't hold their own with us...
Tarantino: I would close the iron door on them. (*Laughs*) We banished them. Not from the store, but... I CLOSED THE IRON DOOR ON THEM.

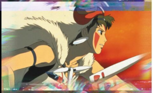
Is it true that the title of *Reservoir Dogs* came about from a customer mispronouncing the title of *Au Revoir Les Enfants*?
Tarantino: No, it didn't come from a customer. It came from me mocking the Buñuel movie *An Andalusian Dog*. I just started calling it 'Reservoir Dog', making fun of it. And it wasn't just meant to be a mock on *Andalusion Dog*; it was meant to be a mock of every type of movie like that. But then, after I'd said it for a long time, I was like, "Hey, that's a pretty good title. I don't know what it fucking means, but it's a pretty good title." And then one day, after I had written the script, I was in a McDonald's. And I put the script down on the counter as I was going to pick up my Big Mac or whatever, and some young guy glanced down and goes, "'Reservoir Dog'? That's a great title, man! I'd go and see that." I go, "Hmm, I might be onto something here..."
Avary: That's a good McDonald's story.

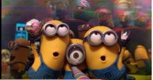
Quentin, you've said that *True Romance*, your first screenplay to be filmed, has the spirit of Video Archives in it.
Tarantino: It definitely does. It's a more fanciful version — obviously none of that shit ever happened to me. I didn't get a suitcase full of cocaine, and I didn't know any gangsters. But

Video Archives Press Image by Jason Shaltz (opener port), Alamy, Getty Images, Todd Mecklem, Shutterstock



Far left: Chris Penn, Tarantino, Tim Roth (and son Jack) signing *Reservoir Dogs* posters at Video Archives in 1993. **Above:** *Fantastic Planet* (1973). **Left, from top:** Video Archives store fodder *That Darn Cat!* (1965) and *Snowball Express* (1972), and podcast topic *Dark Star* (1984).





Right: Some favourites that Tarantino and Avary have watched with their kids: *Princess Mononoke* (1997), 2013's *Despicable Me 2*, and *Peppa Pig*.

even though all that stuff was movie shit, the people at Video Archives felt like it was this big-budget, Tony Scott-directed version of their childhood memories. It captured our aesthetic. It captured our *je ne sais quoi*, alright? The kind of *esprit de corps* we had.

Avary: Clarence was the comic-book-store version of you.

Tarantino: Exactly. The truth of the matter is there is no coaxial cable connecting the movies I did to the life I lived before. It's more like a fishing wire, as opposed to a plug-in. But more than most directors, when it came to the '90s, we had a one-on-one connection to the customers — what they liked and didn't like, responded to and didn't respond to. We weren't a bunch of dumb shits who worked at a Blockbuster who didn't know the collection and didn't know shit about crap.

Avary: There was no algorithm back then to guide you. We had to be the algorithm.

Speaking of which, you're no longer choosing tapes for customers, but you're both now dads — how have you tackled the task of choosing your kids' first films?

Avary: My daughter, who's on the show with us and serves as an announcer, had the good fortune of being my child. So her first films were, like, *Fantastic Planet*, Jan Švankmajer, the darkest of Miyazaki. Things like that.

Tarantino: *Hey Good Lookin'*!

Avary: "When she's ready for comedies, I'm showing her *The Tenant*."

Tarantino: [My son is] pretty young, so he's only really seen one movie. I thought I was hitting a Minions cartoon, and I realise it's *Despicable Me Part 2*. And he seemed to be interested in the opening credits, so I go, "Okay, I guess we're watching *Despicable Me Part 2*." He's used to watching this shaky computer animation on baby shows, but I think I saw in his face that he saw this was far more sophisticated. A more consuming experience than, say, *Peppa Pig*. I actually do like *Peppa Pig*; I watch it a lot. But this seemed like, "Wow, overwhelming." He gets up and he walks behind the couch, but he's still watching the TV. He goes over to his toy box and picks up a toy, but he's still watching the TV. We watched it for 20 minutes, until it was time for him to go to the park, and then the next day we watched another 15 minutes of it. And so, in the course of a week, in small bites, the first movie Leo ever watched was *Despicable Me Part 2*.

This may be the only interview *Empire* has ever done to touch on both *Demonoid* and *Peppa Pig*.

Tarantino: I'll say it — *Peppa Pig* is the greatest British import of this decade.

We're very proud of it.

Tarantino: You should be. You should be. ●

THE VIDEO ARCHIVES PODCAST STARTS FROM 19 JULY ON STITCHER, THE SXM APP, AND ALL MAJOR PODCAST LISTENING PLATFORMS

FROM THE ARCHIVES

The former videostore clerks on a couple of bizarro films you absolutely, positively need to watch

DEMONOID (1981)

Roger Avary on why it's a must-see

"That was one I hadn't seen and frankly it opened a third eye on my forehead. Specifically to Mexploitation. And to these great, powerful, almost Renaissance-like artists who are working down there with limited resources, and just doubling down on everything and making the most out of nothing. It is incredible to watch."

THE ONE ARMED EXECUTIONER (1981)

Quentin Tarantino on why it's a must-see

"I've known about this movie for years, because I remember the box. They also had some cut-up trailer in front of a bunch of Paragon Home Video movies, so I remember seeing the trailer forever. The director is this guy called Bobby Suarez; I really liked one he did called *Cleopatra Wong*. But it was one of those titles I never got around to. It's a really good revenge-o-matic: we watched it thinking it would be our third movie on a show, the exploitation section. And we fucking loved it so much, we went, 'No, this is number one. We're starting off with this.'"

GODS AMONG US

In our regular series, we pay tribute to the towering, mega-watt stars who still roam Hollywood

The eternally charming, ever alluring king of the comebacks

JOHN TRAVOLTA

WORDS **ADAM SMITH** ILLUSTRATION **CHRISTOPHER LEE LYONS**

IT IS THE evening of 24 November 1992, and a drama worthy of a Hollywood development meeting is playing out 41,000 feet over Washington, DC. A tiny Gulfstream jet, callsign N728T, is rocketing through the sky. The cabin and cockpit are both in complete darkness. A few hours into the jet's scheduled flight, the tiny aircraft's primary electrical generator has suddenly failed. The plane has automatically switched to its secondary generator, but the resulting power surge has now knocked out that system, too.

In the cockpit, the pilot stares in alarm at the plane's rapidly dimming instruments. Thick clouds below obstruct the view of any landmarks, and with no instrumentation, he is essentially flying blind. With only a torch for illumination, a magnetic compass and a battery-powered emergency attitude indicator, the pilot begins what anyone familiar with aircraft will tell you is a risky manoeuvre: a blind rapid descent through 11,000 feet of cloud cover. In such situations pilots are told to 'fly the instruments', to avoid the spatial disorientation that has resulted in more than one catastrophe, but the pilot of N728T doesn't *have* any instrumentation.

Ten minutes later the Gulfstream punches out of the clouds, barely 1,000 feet above the ground. With only limited brakes, the landing is fast and hard: all four tyres blow out almost immediately. N728T finally skids to a halt at the junction between Washington Airport's two main runways. "That was a squeaker," a safety official later told *The Washington Post*. "I thought it could have gone either way."

But then, maybe things were fated to turn out just fine in the end. If there was anyone who knew about turbulence, about negotiating tricky situations, about, well, staying alive, it was N728T's pilot: one John Travolta. He has, after all, always been a kind of walking miracle, a born survivor. Even his most ardent fans would admit that the misses outnumber the hits by some ›

margin. After an incendiary early career — stratospheric TV fame with *Welcome Back, Kotter*, the decade-defining *Saturday Night Fever*, the evergreen *Grease* — he plunged into a years-long career slump. All seemed lost, before a single supporting role led to the most spectacular comeback in Hollywood history. A mere bit of unplanned 'plummeting' wasn't the kind of detail that was going to derail that kind of destiny.

Through it all — the career catastrophes, unexpected revivals, personal tragedies, near airplane crashes and *Battlefield Earth* — Travolta endures, his apparently undimmable appeal more in tune with the ancient gods of Hollywood's previous era than the Method actors who are his angsty contemporaries. More than perhaps any modern star, audiences are drawn to *him* more than they are to any character he happens to be playing. There's something open, generous, irresistibly vulnerable about his screen presence.

Take the reaction of notoriously waspish critic Pauline Kael, who responded with protective horror when approached by aspirant Travolta biographer Nigel Andrews. "But you wouldn't write anything *negative* about him, would you?" Andrews reports the alarmed Kael as saying. The most acute and occasionally brutal critic of her generation had been reduced to a kind of maternal goo by the idea of any Travolta muck being raked. And the secret to all of this?

Love, it turns out.

* * *

"HE DANCED IN my womb," Nigel Andrews reports Travolta's mother, Helen, as having once said of her youngest child. *In utero* gyrations aside, John Joseph Travolta was adored from the moment he arrived. Born in 1954 in Englewood, New Jersey, he was the youngest son, the last of a family of two brothers and three sisters. And he was a performer from the start. When he was eight his parents entered him in a twist contest at the local church. Little Johnny Travolta gyrated furiously on the stage, dazzling the crowd (30,000 strong, he implausibly later said) with precursors of the moves that would later propel him from the illuminated floors of *Saturday Night Fever* — via a quick twirl with Princess Di — to *Pulp Fiction*'s Jack Rabbit Slim's. Finally, with her youngest apparently unable to stop, Mum intervened. "The poor kid looked so trapped and exhausted," she told *Good Housekeeping*. "I kept gesturing to him, 'It's okay, you can walk off.'" There was a sense, already, that he was unstoppable.

And, a little later, there were the looks. In 1977, a 23-year-old Travolta sat down with Cameron Crowe for an interview in *Playgirl*. "It's always the ones who were gawky at school," he told Crowe of the features that by then were driving the nation's teenage girls into a kind of collective meltdown. "See, now I always had pretty eyes; I was an adorable child from the day I was born until about ten. Then, from ten on I had a big nose and big lips. My eyes were always blue, very pretty, but it didn't seem to coordinate until I was about 20 years old."

But when they did — oh boy. He was incandescent. In his first major screen role, guileless *guido* Vinnie Barbarino in teen sitcom *Welcome Back, Kotter*, the piercing baby blues, the cupid lips, the jet-black bouffant locks were

Clockwise from main: The iconic *Saturday Night Fever* saw Travolta go big — though at some cost; As pig-blood bearer Billy Nolan in *Carrie*; Winning the heart of Olivia Newton-John's Sandy — and the world — in *Grease*.

THE BOX OFFICE

John Travolta's top five money-makers

GREASE
$396 million

BOLT
$310 million

LOOK WHO'S TALKING
$297 million

AUSTIN POWERS IN GOLDMEMBER
$297 million

WILD HOGS
$254 million

* Global box office, according to BoxOfficeMojo.com

enough to ignite a conflagration of teenage lust that seemed all but impossible to douse. Replying to the mountain of fan letters to the goofy-stud-with-a-heart-of-gold cost ABC $30,000 a week. Fans turned up in Englewood, grabbing parts of the Travolta residence, bricks, slates, bits of the fence, with which to adorn bedroom shrines to the swoonsome hoodlum. With Travolta-mania at a deafening peak, and after sudsy TV movie *The Boy In The Plastic Bubble* (1976), Travolta launched his first serious assault on the big screen. *Saturday Night Fever* (1977), a ripped-from-the-headlines (even if they turned out to be made up) tale of blue-collar kids escaping their humdrum lives for the fleeting glamour of the dancefloor, looked superficially unpromising: a repackaged '50s dance-craze movie at best. It would, of course, turn out to be a blazing triumph. And, for John Travolta, a terrible trap.

★ ★ ★ ★

"HE COMES ALIVE as a human being, if you're just sitting in a room with him," *Saturday Night Fever*'s director John Badham told *Empire* in ›

2018 of first meeting his star. "But that light really comes out when the camera's on. You never get a feeling he's acting. He brings this charm to a character who had so many negative things going for him. Mean to his parents, rebellious, sexist with women, but somehow overlain with this charm that he had. I just knew to get out of his way."

Saturday Night Fever was perfectly calibrated as a star vehicle for Travolta. And it's a movie that just wouldn't have worked without him. Tony Manero, from when we first glimpse him, strutting the streets of Brooklyn, is a fleshed-out, humanised incarnation of Hollywood's eternal Rebel: James Dean in a Persil-white suit. But even Dean, who all but invented adolescent anguish for the screen, never quite had Travolta's aching vulnerability or dared to make his character so superficially unlikeable, arrogant and finally bewildered as Travolta did with Manero.

Grease (1978), meanwhile, was a confection, a precision-tooled Travolta-delivery-system, stripped of all the grittiness of the original stage musical, awarded a PG and spoonfed to a baying crowd of teenyboppers who couldn't legally catch the Fever. But between them, over a period of less than a couple of years, the two films propelled Travolta to four-quadrant global superstardom that spanned TV, movies, stage musicals and, with a 1976 album, modestly titled *John Travolta*, music.

Much is often written about the ascent of a star, less about the fall. What does it feel like? To have been universally adored, and then suddenly scorned, or worse, ignored? "How did you go bankrupt?" a character in Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* asks. "Two ways. Gradually, then suddenly," is the reply. Maybe the decline seemed like that for Travolta: a slight sense of disquiet followed by mounting panic. In 1978 he was the hottest star on the planet. By the early 1990s, his films — *The Experts* (1989), *Eyes Of An Angel* (1991), *Shout* (1991) — were playing limited runs, or more often going straight to video.

What had happened? It didn't help that around him Hollywood was splitting into two camps, the Oscar-baiting serious thesps such as Pacino and De Niro on the one side, and the Stallones and Schwarzeneggers — cartoon action heroes built of body lotion and zingers — on the other. Travolta fitted comfortably into neither tribe. He was trapped, so soon, in a kind of

Clockwise from main: With Samuel L. Jackson in *Pulp Fiction*. Royale with cheese?; The great *Blow Out*; Donning the leg warmers again for the ill-judged *Staying Alive*; A smooth criminal alongside Rene Russo in *Get Shorty*; More jiving in *Look Who's Talking*.

aspic, unfairly relegated in many minds to the embarrassing excesses of the disco era.

Staying Alive (1983) was an inevitable, perhaps excusable, Hollywood cash-in, but nevertheless stupendously misjudged in every respect. Director Sylvester Stallone's transformation of Travolta's body into a *doppelgänger* of his own (one somehow less effortlessly sexy than the one Tony Manero displays while dragging himself out of his pit to the mirror in Badham's film) is a breathtaking display of Hollywood solipsism. And Stallone's ruthless purging of the original film's earthiness in favour of an ever-soaring triumphalist fanfare utterly misses the point. "Travolta still has his star presence," wrote a disappointed Kael in *The New Yorker*, "but [Stallone] doesn't bother much with scenes, characters or dialogue. He just covers Travolta in what looks like an oil-slick and goes for the wham-bams."

The wham-bams were bad enough, but that Travolta's career was in a tailspin had become depressingly evident with 1985's *Perfect*. The screenplay seems never to have amounted to much more than a deal-memo stapled to a magazine article about *how everybody's wearing Lycra and going to the gym these days*. Travolta is as likeable and attractive as ever, but there are limits even to his charm.

As damaging was the fact that the two films that pointed to a different, more critically respected mid-career both unfairly fizzled. *Blow Out* (1981) saw him reunite with Brian De Palma after his effective turn as the bearer of the pig's blood, Billy Nolan, in *Carrie* (1976). The pair had remained friends, and when De Palma was looking for a lead for his paranoid thriller about a movie soundman caught up in a political assassination, he sent Travolta the script. "John is a really sweet guy," De Palma later told director Noah Baumbach. "He's really generous to the other actors, he's incredibly warm and giving. And he wanted to do it." And it's that vital warmth, always the pulsing jugular of Travolta's appeal, that's at the heart of De Palma's brilliant, chilly film. The close-ups of Travolta's stricken face as he listens to his tapes, discovering the magnitude of the conspiracy that surrounds him, provide the humanity that perfectly complements the director's trademark technical fireworks.

Urban Cowboy (1980) was dismissed by critics at the time as a retread of *Saturday Night Fever*, with Houston replacing Brooklyn and the Texas two-step standing in for disco. Travolta plays Bud Davis, a thrillingly dim oil-worker who marries Sissy (a stupendously good Debra Winger) on a whim, only to find their relationship tested both by scenery-chewing marriage-buster Wes (Scott Glenn) and a competitive passion for mechanical rodeo. An easy film to mock, then, but not a bad one, and one, perhaps, with the seeds of greatness somewhere in it. Journeyman director James Bridges struggles to bring things into focus, but the performances are superb. Travolta, in the least promising of the roles, is unafraid to play Bud as, well, a bit of a dick, as

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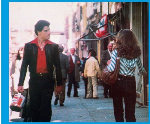
THE MOMENT

Tony struts his stuff

Saturday Night Fever (1977)



By 1977, John Travolta was already a teen sensation. But it's the three or so minutes he spends strutting through the bustling streets of the Bronx in the opening titles of *Saturday Night Fever* that mark the moment he transforms himself from a teenybopper pin-up to a legit film star. It's a bravura piece of filmmaking. Opening with a wide shot of the distant Manhattan skyline, John Badham's camera first cuts tighter onto the Verrazzano-Narrows Bridge (later to play a key role in the story), down to the elevated D Train, then spirals further to the streets of Brooklyn where we first see Tony Manero, resplendent in a neon-scarlet, open-necked shirt, strutting through the streets, his streets, to the rhythm of 'Stayin' Alive'. Place identified, plot foreshadowed and character established in under 60 seconds. Breathtaking. But it's Travolta who sells it — feline, cocksure, eyes darting, checking his shoes, swinging an incongruous paint can — all to the irresistible beat of that song. Rarely has a character, a *star*, been introduced with such confidence and swagger. It's a little piece of pop-art all on its own, blazingly assured, instantly mesmerising and utterly believable. A king in his little kingdom.

usual displaying that ability to register every fleeting emotion with uncanny immediacy.

Nevertheless, the damage was done and, by the late 1980s, Travolta was as cold as it is possible to get in Hollywood without turning up on *Celebrity Squares*. A new agent was acquired. Phone calls were made. A solution was found in the shape of a screenplay about a motormouth baby. Obviously.

★ ★ ★ ★

IT'S RECEIVED WISDOM that *Look Who's Talking* (1989) was Travolta's nadir, the cruel exploitation of a star past his prime. In fact, in box-office terms at least, it laid the groundwork for his resurrection. Travolta, in the role of James Ubriacco, the loveable, ever-so-slightly rumpled dad with an infant Bruce Willis for a son, is affable, charming, and still sexy after all these years. "Twelve years after *Saturday Night Fever* he is a warm and winning actor when he's not shoe-horned into the wrong roles," as Roger Ebert later put it in the *Chicago Sun-Times*. The studio didn't agree, shelving writer/director Amy Heckerling's picture for months, then panicking and airbrushing Travolta out of its posters and publicity when they did finally release it. "It had tested like *E.T.*," Travolta's agent Jonathan Krane told Nigel Andrews. "But their excuse was that John Travolta was box-office poison."

A lawsuit from Willis and Travolta finally forced the studio's hand and, once finally set loose, *Look Who's Talking* was a box-office phenomenon: $297 million worldwide off a $7 million budget, the highest-grossing film then ever directed by a woman. In foreign territories, it was Columbia's second-most successful comedy after *Ghostbusters II*. Perhaps what it proved was that Travolta needed a good director. One who could see in him what audiences had once seen, and set it free.

Quentin Tarantino saw perfectly what Travolta was capable of, and told him so. Speaking to *Cosmopolitan* after the movie's release, Tarantino recalled a meeting with Travolta in the director's apartment during which he chastised the star about his recent career choices. "John, what did you do? Don't you remember what Pauline Kael said about you? What *Truffaut* said about you? Don't you know what you *mean* to American cinema?" He offered Travolta the choice of roles in two movies he was prepping: *From Dusk Till Dawn* or *Pulp Fiction*. "I'm not a vampire kind of guy," Travolta said. And history was thus made.

Pulp Fiction premiered at the Cannes Film Festival, and in all respects it was an instant sensation. But the story that dominated all others that summer of 1994 was, "*Did you see John Travolta?*" It's a jaw-dropping, bravura performance, located in a gloriously weird hinterland between comedy and ultraviolence. Vincent Vega is an utterly unique creation: majestically off-kilter, shambolically cool, unexpectedly sympathetic. It's a breathtakingly out-there assemblage of loopy moments, memetic gestures and raddled, ragged charm. There have been Hollywood comebacks before; there will be again. But there has never been a moment so unexpected, welcome and cinematically joyous as Travolta's reinvention. It was the return of the prodigal star.

★ ★ ★ ★

AND SO, TO the third act. It would be nice to report that *Pulp Fiction* marked a completely clean break, the start of a triumphant upswing.

Alamy, Getty Images

Clockwise from main: *Facing/off with Nicolas Cage; As* Hairspray*'s Edna Turnblad alongside Nikki Blonsky; Mr Blue makes his point in the remake of* The Taking Of Pelham 123*; As lawyer Robert Shapiro alongside David Schwimmer in* The People V. O.J. Simpson.

It's not been so simple. "*Saturday Night Fever* and *Pulp Fiction* were sort of bookends for my career," Travolta told Larry King in 2009. But what *Pulp Fiction* had achieved was to permanently banish the idea that he was a joke, a has-been: the ghost of *Saturday Night Fever* had finally been exorcised. His career since has been varied, interesting, and constant. Three films a year, often four (in Hollywood they still call this admirable work-ethic 'Travolta-ing'). In the mid to late '90s he leveraged his rediscovered popularity, and his new $20 million asking price (a no-doubt pleasant bump from the $145,000 he'd got for *Pulp Fiction*), conjuring some of the hip magic he had brought to Vincent Vega in Barry Sonnenfeld's *Get Shorty* in 1995. He played whimsical, romantic and inspirational in *Michael* and *Phenomenon* (both 1996). And then there was John Travolta: Action Star. He was a perfect fit for John Woo's slightly dreamy, dove-strewn style as nuclear terrorist Vic Deakins in *Broken Arrow* (1996), and then puckishly purloined Nicolas Cage's mannerisms in *Face/Off* (1997). The aughts and beyond have been less consistently successful. But he was enjoyably game in John Waters' *Hairspray* (2007), as Edna Turnblad, the role originally played by Divine.

It's always been temptingly easy to put the boot into the more dubious of Travolta's films. But so what? Hollywood was built on stars, not actors. And that's the secret elixir of his success: he embodies, resurrects, Hollywood's original, primal appeal. He had the misfortune to come of age in the midst of an era when the fundamental mystique of the film star was being ripped apart by the anguished neurosis of the New Hollywood: the De Niros, Hoffmans and Pacinos who were staging a temporary coup; actors for whom being *liked* was almost antithetical to their craft.

But it's not hyperbolic to say that the closest analogue to Travolta is Marilyn Monroe. Adored. Iconic. In some classics. In some stinkers. Who cares? She's Monroe. "I can't help it that the white suit made me iconic, or that leather jacket in *Grease*," Travolta mused in *Playboy* when the comparison was put to him in 2018. "Marilyn Monroe can't help it that that white dress made her an icon. It's just part of the illusion... I've felt lucky about what I had achieved... I've already gone up and above what I had expected."

And the 2000s have had their undisputed highlights, reminders that counting Travolta out is an unwise bet. He was affecting as an alcoholic former teacher falling to pieces in Shainee Gabel's not-enough-seen drama *A Love Song For Bobby Long* (2004); he chewed scenery as subway hijacker Mr Blue in Tony Scott's muscular remake of *The Taking Of Pelham 123* (2009); in 2016 he made the leap to TV and dazzled as defence attorney Robert Shapiro in *The People V. O.J. Simpson*. ("You simply can't take your eyes off Travolta," said *Variety*.)

Stardom is not a skill. It's a profoundly human quality, an attraction that reaches out to the audience, that entrances, disarms, and invites us to project onto it whatever we want. It's magical, indefinable, unlearnable. And stars with the wattage of Travolta come around once in a generation, if that. It was Tarantino's genius to know this and to realise that we knew it, too — we'd just somehow forgotten.

Sixty years after Chubby Checker rang out in that church hall in Englewood, John Travolta has nothing left to prove, and, if we're lucky, much still to give. There are movies lined up, there is always the newly respectable avenue of TV. He's still up there, twisting away, effortlessly excelling at that trickiest of things: being loved. Nobody tell him to stop.

Not just yet. ●

MIA

The Travolta roles that never were

AMERICAN GIGOLO

According to director Paul Schrader, Travolta was uncomfortable with some of the racier material, hence exiting the existential clothes drama. More comfortable? Richard Gere.

AN OFFICER AND A GENTLEMAN

Travolta turned down the 1982 smash as he was otherwise occupied learning to fly jets. His agent quit, the part was recast and the world's male strippers found themselves channelling their inner — yes! — Richard Gere.

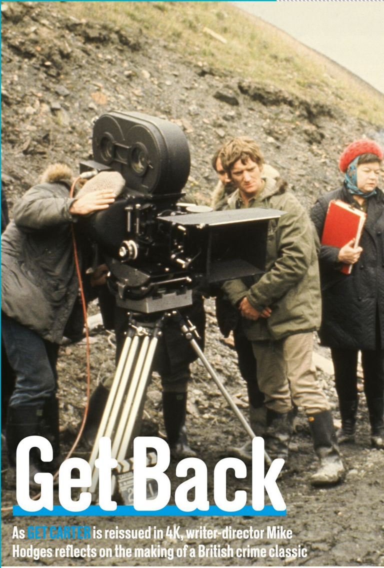
SPLASH

"The role in the Hanks film called *Splash* was written for me," Travolta said in 2021. "But then, you know, we wouldn't have Tom Hanks. So let's have Tom Hanks, you see what I mean?"

PRETTY WOMAN

Travolta was in the frame for the role of corporate titan Edward Lewis in these-days-dubious romance *Pretty Woman*, but in the end demurred. As was by now required by federal statute, the role went to Richard Gere.

! SPOILER WARNING



Get Back

As GET CARTER is reissued in 4K, writer-director Mike Hodges reflects on the making of a British crime classic

"*GET CARTER* WAS made 50 years ago," laughs Mike Hodges, as *Empire* gets down to the nitty-gritty of interviewing the director of one of the greatest British movies of all time. "I've answered every question!"

That's not entirely true. *Get Carter* may have entered its second half-century, true, but Hodges' startling debut film — now remastered in glorious 4K, giving its epic bleakness a new coat of paint — is fresh as a daisy, and with each rewatch throws up new angles; new points of interest. That's something Hodges himself finds whenever he catches the movie, in which an ice-cold, reptilian Michael Caine plays a London gangster who finds himself going back to his old stomping ground of Newcastle to investigate his brother's murder. Over the years the film has become almost overshadowed by its iconography and its deliciously quotable script (by Hodges himself, based on Ted Lewis' book, *Jack's Return Home*). "You're a big man, but you're in bad shape; with me, it's a full-time job", "Carter! That's my name!" and "Your eyes are

Michael Caine gives Ian Hendry both barrels, as director Mike Hodges looks on from behind the camera.

still the same. Pissholes in the snow" are just three of the enduring classics (all delivered by Caine with a mesmerising combination of insouciance and rage). But there's more here to explore. Much more, as we were delighted to find when we spoke to Hodges — now 89 — recently.

***Get Carter* clearly means something to you still. It's not a film you've grown tired of.**
Not at all. I don't look at it every day, but I seem to see it once or twice a year.

Can you watch it as a detached, impartial observer?
After a period of time, you do move into an area where you are detached, in a sense, and you're looking at it totally differently. When I see it on the big screen, it's much more powerful than I remember. It was my first feature film and up until then I'd made two television films, which brought everything to a head with me being offered the chance to make it. You don't see television films with an audience. When you see your first film with an audience, it's a totally different experience. I was surprised, actually. The whole end sequence, in the coal fields outside of Newcastle, had a kind of majestic quality which I really hadn't thought of. It looked very Italian. It's largely to do with Michael Caine's performance, but also the location and the size of the screen. Surprisingly I had quite a good sense of size, which not all British directors have, because we live in a small country. I look at it again and I realise that I was very influenced by Westerns. I saw pretty well every one that came out in the '50s and '60s. I was always thinking in terms of size and the width of the shots.

Westerns were very much defined by white hats and black hats, but began to get more ambiguous. And Jack Carter is an ambiguous leading character. How did you see him? As a hero, an antihero, or a villain?
Well, it's very easy to forget that Jack Carter didn't go up to Newcastle to seek revenge. He went there because he thought there was something dubious about his brother's death. When he got there, he began to uncover something really serious. You must understand that the criminal has their own idea of what's moral and what's immoral. One of the things that's serious, that's immoral for criminals, is tampering with young people. And he doesn't do anything until he sees that movie, the porn movie, in which his niece, who may be his daughter, nobody quite knows, is involved. And that's when he goes over-the-top and it then turns into a kind of Jacobean tragedy and he takes revenge on everybody involved. The killings after that are quite hard to take, actually.

At one point he injects a woman with drugs and leaves her body in a pond. He's very cold-blooded.
If you're going to make a film about a serious psychopath, which is what Jack Carter is, you have to do it. You can't ignore the fact that there is terrible brutality attached. Once you make the decision to make this film, and Michael Caine certainly felt the same way, you go for it. You do not hang about. These people are not pleasant.

Over the years, Jack Carter has been co-opted by some and misinterpreted as a heroic figure. Why did that happen?
Well, I think Michael Caine made the role bearable. He brought a lot of glamour to it, which I hadn't anticipated when I wrote the script, because Michael wasn't attached to the film at that time. But when I started working with him, I realised this was going to be a different film to the way I'd imagined it. I had to jack the film up a bit.

Jack ends up dead on a beach, with a hole in his forehead like a pisshole in the snow. Was that something you wanted to make unambiguous? In the novel, *Jack's Return Home*, he's dying at the end, but it's left open to interpretation.
I thought Ted Lewis' book was a terrific piece of

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Above: Eric Paice (Hendry) meets his maker. **Below:** Jack Carter (Caine) cosies up to his landlady; Britt Ekland's iconic phone-sex scene; Carter's on a mission to avenge his brother's death.

writing. It really is beautifully written. I had all sorts of people who hated me for killing Carter in the end. But it was undoubtedly, in my opinion, the right way to go. I couldn't think of any other ending. There's no other answer to this film. In those days, quite a few criminals hung around the film world. They would come up to me and say, "Very good film, but killing him at the end, that was wrong." They were very upset. I think their sense of morality is a bit different than mine, but I had no choice. No regrets and no choice.

***Get Carter* came out in 1971, almost a year to the day after *Jack's Return Home* was published. That's a sensationally quick turnaround. What was the adaptation process like for you?**
I think I drank a lot of whiskey. I could write a whole script in two nights, or two days and two nights. It would be in longhand and I would get a typist to look at it and type it up. The book was filled with wonderful stuff. A lot of [the film] is Ted, you know, not mine. I'm grateful to him as I had a wonderful springboard.

Did you talk to elements of the criminal underworld?
No, I'm pretty innocent. I had never seen a pornographic film. [Producer] Michael Klinger had run a club for soft porn in Soho, and he had access to porn films which were probably illegal. They were also terrible, by the way. My reproduction of one in the film is classy. I'd worked on *World In Action* and had seen a lot of seedy people, but not necessarily criminals. I was very into researching every subject I was dealing with.
I remember when I decided to shoot in Newcastle, there'd been a murder up there. It was called the La Dolce Vita Murder. There was this nightclub in Newcastle which was so poverty-stricken that they called it La Dolce Vita, "the sweet life". Through a series of circumstances, this guy was killed, and it turns out he was killed by a hitman who had come up from London. I investigated the story and found one of the men had disappeared two years earlier, leaving his house, which I used in the film. I rooted myself into this world, and that helped me a lot. I felt I was on secure territory.

So the decision to relocate to Newcastle wasn't just about the windswept vista and the beach and framing Jack against the backdrop of poverty?
Well, I did my national service in the Navy in the late '50s. I ended up on a minesweeper, and as a result of that I went all the way up the east coast. Hull, Grimsby — these were desperate places in those days. When I read Ted's book I saw all these places I had visited when I'd go ashore in my bell bottoms and white cap. I was this middle-class boy in disguise, really, and I would see sights that most middle-class people weren't even aware of. So as I read Ted's book, I realised I wanted to shift the location to somewhere I knew and had experienced. I went all the way up the east coast until I got to North Shields.

Jack is from Newcastle, but Michael doesn't try a Geordie accent. Did you ever discuss whether he should do that?
I think that would have been an imposition. I worked on the principle that he'd been in London for so long that he just adopted the accent. We all adopt the accents of where we are.

What changed when Michael came on board?
When he joined, the film moved into a different

Clockwise from left: Money talks: Carter with Keith (Alun Armstrong); Gunning for trouble; Carter gets to grips with crooked businessman Cliff Brumby (Bryan Mosley).

Alamy, Warner Bros.

category. MGM came on board to provide extra money. Because of television, I cast all of my films myself, and no-one even asked me who was in them. It didn't matter. You had a good actor, that was it. But when you have a star attached, it became apparent that MGM wanted all sorts of damn silly people. I think Yul Brynner was in line for one of the roles at one point. Every time they came up with one of these suggestions I said, "Look, I can't make this film." The casting of the film was absolutely sacrosanct. I had to fight tooth and nail, and dear Britt Ekland came on board in a tiny role and got me off the hook, as they now had two stars.

It's one of the quintessential Caine performances. A lot of what is great about Caine is in Jack Carter — the way he can explode into anger at the drop of a hat, his sense of cool, his charisma, the way he looked.

Well, he knew how to look. Dougie Hayward, who was a very famous tailor in those days, made his suits. [Caine] presented me with the performance. There are moments, like the crossing on the ferry where there's a mother and child there and he looks at them with a sadness about him. He knows he's not normal, he knows that he'll never have that kind of life. Later, when he sees the pornographic film, he's on his own and he can cry. He couldn't have cried if anyone else was there. I think, "Who is he crying for?" Is he crying for his daughter, or his niece? Or is he crying, I suspect, for himself?

There are rumours that Ian Hendry, who was your initial choice for the role and ended up playing an antagonist, and Michael didn't see eye to eye. Did that lend their scenes an extra frisson?

Well, the one thing I hated doing was rehearsing before anything. I like to feel free when I bring the actors on location. Now, this is my first film and I thought, "Maybe I should get Ian in to rehearse with Michael," to read through the scene we were going to shoot the next day, which was the racecourse. And Ian arrived, and sadly he was drunk. Patently, not long before Michael's rise to fame, Ian was in the same boat in many ways. He never quite had the kind of stature that Michael had, and I think the drunkenness was jealousy, frankly. So I had to call off the rehearsal. When Ian turned up the next day, there was a delicious frisson between the two of them. Michael was amazing. He didn't bat an eyelid. He's a very cool customer. No mention of what had happened.

You and Michael worked together on comedy-thriller *Pulp* the year after *Get Carter*. Have you two remained friends ever since?

Establishing a friendship with someone who's always on another film around the world is quite difficult. But we are friends. He always thinks I didn't make enough films, and he's quite right. It wasn't my fault, necessarily. Making films in this country is like walking in glue, it really is.

Are you finished making films?

Oh yes. I'm 90 in July. This is my last interview, probably.

You've gone out on a high here, Mike.

[*Laughs*] Well, *Empire*'s a good name!

CHRIS HEWITT

GET CARTER IS OUT ON 25 JULY ON 4K BLU-RAY

!

SPOILER WARNING

THE VIEWING GUIDE

A deep dive into the must-see moments from the month's big release

The Unbearable Weight Of Massive Talent

TOM GORMICAN (WRITES, directs) and Kevin Etten (writes) are the architects of one of the year's wildest swings: a buddy-comedy-cum-meta-treatise-on-action-movies that sees Nicolas 'Nic' Cage star as Nicolas 'Nick' Cage, a fading film star who rediscovers himself after forging a friendship with a suspected arms dealer. Here, the filmmakers talk us through its key moments.

CAGE AIR

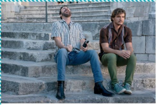
The movie opens with Nicolas Cage, of course. But not Gormican/Etten's Cage. Instead, we see Cage in all his pomp, as a bored young girl (Katrin Vankova) watches *Con Air* on TV, only to be rudely interrupted by a team that kidnaps her. "We had flirted with both *Face/Off* and *Con Air*," says Gormican. "It ended up being much funnier in the end to do the heroic, ridiculous Cameron Poe character." The sequence replaced an opening shot which zoomed in on Cage standing on top of the Sunset Tower Hotel in LA, with "a giant gospel version of 'The Times They Are A-Changin'' playing. Then we were like, 'Let's start with an action scene!'"

MANO-A-MONOLOGUE

Then we meet Nick Cage, a wounded wastrel who's desperate to recapture his past glories. Which he tries to do by delivering a lurid monologue about bullets and brains to a bewildered film director outside a hotel. Said film director is David Gordon Green, although Gormican and Etten said they wrote it for Tarantino ("It was us trying to do a hyper-violent, verbose, Tarantino-esque monologue," says Gormican), then tried a number of other directors including Martin Scorsese (who said yes) before Covid protocols (the film was shot in Bulgaria) saw Green step in. The monologue is later re-delivered, perfectly, by Nick Cage during a tense moment. "The plan always was that he would do the monologue again and nail it where it felt appropriate for the film," adds Gormican.

PIANO MAN

At the birthday party of his (fictional) daughter Addy, a bitter and boozed-up Cage interrupts proceedings to dedicate a song to her. Which devolves into an improvised, embarrassing diatribe about Hollywood. Initially the song was set to be a cover of Guns N' Roses' 'November Rain', but Cage came up with his own ditty. "If Nic Cage is going to write a song and send it to you, you're going to use it," laughs Etten. "He called



us and said, 'I can't sing this, I think Axe would be very mad,'" laughs Gormican. "Axe" being actual Axl Rose. "Turns out they're friends in Vegas!"

BEAR WITH JAVI

Down on his luck, Nick accepts a $1 million offer to attend a billionaire superfan's birthday party. That superfan is Javi (Pedro Pascal), who wears Cage down with his puppyish enthusiasm and love of movies, including a viewing of *Paddington 2*. "Javi maybe is the human Paddington," laughs Gormican, who admits they remodelled Javi to fit Pedro Pascal's personality. "He often presents as a very tough, incredibly macho character, but he's this sweet, lovable Muppet of a human."

NATIONAL TREASURE

At one point, Javi shows Nick his collection of Nicolas Cage memorabilia, including the golden guns he used in *Face/Off* (and which Nick wields at the end of the movie). None of the props on display were the real deal. "Our props team went to town," says Gormican. "We were able to buy posters and things like that, but we had to create almost everything else. The original golden guns are apparently in an armoured safe in Arizona."

LONG, STRANGE TRIP

The key to the movie for Gormican and Etten was deepening that Nick-Javi relationship. The script initially had the two bond while "talking over one long night", says Gormican. But when the light turned green, the filmmakers had the money to get them out and about. And give the characters a ton of LSD, leading to a hilarious section where the two trip major ballsacks, get mega-paranoid about being followed, and fail to navigate a short wall, a scene for which Cage asked if he should go 'Full Cage'. "We struggled with, 'Do you do a drug sequence where the characters see a cartoony animation?'" says Etten. "What felt more real was this paranoia notion. It's within the tone of the film and we could make a big, funny, stupid scene out of it as well."

HOLLYWOOD ENDING

The movie ends with a sudden transition from a chase scene to a film-within-a-film, a Hollywood-ised take on the events we've been watching. Turns out this is the movie Nick and Javi have written together, and we're at the premiere. "There was never a different version," says Gormican. "It was always going to transition into a film. It was just a way to expedite the thing that people don't care about — action scenes — and go right into the thing people do care about, which is the relationships."

LEAVE NO MANDO BEHIND

Javi's fate is left hanging in the 'real-life' action sequence, but he reappears for a touching hug with Nick right at the end. It feels almost fantastical, like a riff on beloved characters miraculously showing up at the end of a film because they've been spared by enthusiastic focus groups, but Gormican says that isn't the case. "In the original version, Javi wasn't at the premiere," he says. "He was in hiding, and it was a phone call with Nick. But we realised audiences needed to see the two of them together. We could never kill off Pedro." That would be like killing off Paddington. **CHRIS HEWITT**

THE UNBEARABLE WEIGHT OF MASSIVE TALENT **IS OUT ON 11 JULY ON DVD, BLU-RAY, 4K AND DIGITAL**

Tim Holt as the spoiled and impetuous George Minafer.

THE MASTERPIECE

We reassess the greatest films of all time, one film at a time

The Magnificent Ambersons

FOR ORSON WELLES, *The Magnificent Ambersons* is the original Difficult Second Album. His first film was admittedly hardly a walk in the park — a turbulent and protracted release, it was a box-office disappointment, and ended up almost empty-handed on Oscar night — but it was still *Citizen Kane*. You try following up *Citizen Kane*, see how easy it is. The pressure was truly on for his next act.

Still just 26 years old, Welles had to prove he was not simply a one-trick pony — that he could live up to the barbed "boy genius" label given to him in the Hollywood press, who mocked his East Coast intellectualism and the unprecedented creative freedom he enjoyed on *Kane*. Hungry and ambitious, Welles had similar designs for *Ambersons* as he had on his first film: here could be a vast, sprawling portrait of a wealthy dynasty that might reflect the image of America as he saw it, in all its vast splendour and ugliness. Here, too, was an opportunity to build on the technical and artistic innovations of *Kane*, to move the medium into exciting new places.

Yet, by the end, both the film and director were broken. The experience turned out to be a torrid example of the clash between art and commerce; the rumours surrounding the project sullied Welles' reputation almost indefinitely; and the film itself is a fascinating artefact of what might have been — the holy grail of lost films, a mystery that endures to this day.

"They destroyed *Ambersons*," Welles would later say. "And the picture itself destroyed me."

It could have been so different. After *Kane*, Welles agonised over what to do next, and by some counts considered over 40 different projects, including potential adaptations of literary European classics like *Les Misérables*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, and *Cyrano de Bergerac*. Eventually, he settled on something closer to home: an adaptation of the novel *The Magnificent Ambersons* by American author Booth Tarkington, which Welles had already produced for radio.

Written in 1918, the book tells the story of an aristocratic family living in the then-sleepy town of Indianapolis in the late 19th century, tracking their fortunes from pomp to destitution, as a new century and the Second Industrial Revolution transforms both the family and their hometown. Welles saw in it a cautionary tale of the rise of industrialisation and the dangers of modernity. He also saw something of himself in the story: he would later claim that Eugene Morgan, the charismatic automobile inventor played by Joseph Cotten, was based on his father, Richard Welles, who was a contemporary of Tarkington. (Given Welles was ever the storyteller off-screen as well as on, it's never been verified if this was actually true.)

But it was the character of George Minafer, the spoiled, impetuous Amberson son played by Tim Holt, that proved the biggest draw. Like Charles Foster Kane, George is a complex figure filled with brilliant contradictions, a privileged man with a litany of personal flaws, yet capable of some small redemption. In George's arrogance and short-sightedness, Welles could craft a potent symbol of America's own greed and inevitable comeuppance.

Alamy, Allstar, Capital Pictures, Getty Images, Shutterstock

Top to bottom: The Ambersons enjoying their magnificent lifestyle with some pals; Tim Holt with Anne Baxter as Lucy Morgan.

The shoot was relatively smooth, if sometimes fraught. In an unusual move, the cast — many from Welles' beloved Mercury Theatre — were made to record the vocals of the entire script ahead of time and then lip-sync to their own voice on set; this experiment was abandoned on day one. But other innovations hit the mark. As well as the box of directorial tricks learned on *Kane* — deep-focus shots, daring framing, moving sets that seem to defy physics— Welles and cinematographer Stanley Cortez used expressionistic lighting to conjure the gaslit Victorian era; attempted handheld-camera shots decades before the Steadicam; and included multiple bravura tracking shots, early examples of the 'oner'.

Lavish production design, too, gave the film a sense of grandeur, the centrepiece of which was the three-storey Amberson mansion. The film's signature ballroom sequence — "the last of the great, long-remembered dances", as Welles' silky voiceover introduces it — remains a triumph of graceful coordination, choreography, and innovative dolly-crane camerawork, meticulously planned and executed.

It was all going so well. But then bombs were dropped on Pearl Harbor, and everything changed. Immediately after principal photography was completed, Welles flew to Brazil to film his next project, a World War II propaganda documentary entitled *It's All True,* and simultaneously oversaw a chaotic post-production on *Ambersons* via a mess of telegrams to his editors back in the US. After an early cut played to a disastrous test screening — wartime audiences were suddenly in no mood for pessimism — the studio, RKO, decided to take matters into its own hands.

With Welles no longer having the right to final cut, as he did on *Kane,* studio executives excised about an hour of footage, and reshot scenes against the director's wishes. Gone was what Welles described as "the best scene in the picture" — Cotten's Eugene and Agnes Moorehead's Fanny Minafer reflecting sadly on their lives in a crumbling old people's home. Lost, too, was the elegiac original ending, an audacious tracking shot through a deserted Amberson mansion that pulls out to show a suddenly unrecognisable view of a polluted Indianapolis, the grip of industrialisation finally tightened. The new final scene, which the actors reluctantly reshot without Welles, instead implies a ludicrously happy ending for Eugene and Fanny.

Whatever happened to the missing hour of footage remains a tantalising mystery — rumours range from 'destroyed in a fire' to 'gathering dust in a Brazilian attic' — but the version we are left with is still remarkable. It's a testament to Welles' filmmaking strengths that even a butchered version of his vision works so well, a "mutilated masterpiece", as director François Truffaut put it. In particular, the opening acts — which perhaps suffered the least from the studio's scythe — are a gorgeously rendered cocktail of moods and tones, the "magnificence" of the old-fashioned good life suffused with the creeping, melancholic feeling that the modern age is coming, and not everyone will survive it.

Time is the immutable beating drum that ultimately befalls the Amberson family, even in the ostensibly happier theatrical cut, and it's a force that even the cherubic-faced genius that was Orson Welles could not overcome. Today, with each passing day, any sign of the fabled director's cut becomes more improbable. All we are left with is the ghost of what survived. It may be one of the great lost treasures of Hollywood, but what remains is still a fairly extraordinary masterwork, from a fairly extraordinary young master. As if stalking the hallways of the deserted Amberson mansion, all that's left for us is a broken but beautiful old ruin to gaze upon. **JOHN NUGENT**

THE MAGNIFICENT AMBERSONS IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY AND DIGITAL

WELLES, WELLES, WELLES

NO FILM DIRECTOR HAS BEEN PORTRAYED ON SCREEN MORE THAN ORSON WELLES. HERE ARE SOME OF THE BEST ORSONS

VINCENT D'ONOFRIO (ED WOOD)

At his lowest ebb in Tim Burton's biopic, Ed Wood (Johnny Depp) ducks into a bar and happens upon his great idol, Orson Welles. A pep talk ensues, during which Wood is told, "Visions are worth fighting for. Why spend your life making someone else's dreams?" D'Onofrio is a dead ringer for Welles visually, but not vocally — the voice here is overdubbed, slightly clumsily (perhaps deliberately, given the film's subject) by voice actor Maurice LaMarche. D'Onofrio got his crack at Welles later, starring in and directing a half-hour short called *Five Minutes, Mr. Welles*. (He's not as good as LaMarche.)

ANGUS MACFADYEN

(THE CRADLE WILL ROCK)

As one of the central figures behind the banned musical *The Cradle Will Rock*, Welles pops up throughout Tim Robbins' ambitious ensemble drama, portrayed by Welsh actor MacFadyen with a fair amount of gusto and verve. We see Welles on stage! Welles dining out! Welles standing for something! A most compelling slab of Angus.

CHRISTIAN McKAY

(ME AND ORSON WELLES)

If English actor McKay hadn't played Welles on screen at some point, he would have been justified in writing to his MP. For McKay had starred in Mark Jenkins' play *Rosebud: The Lives Of Orson Welles*, which brought him to Richard Linklater's attention when he was looking for a Welles for his comedy-drama about a young man (Zac Efron) who works with the director for a few months. With more screen time than most Welleses, McKay captures the pomp of the man, but also a fair amount of complexity, and got a Best Supporting Actor BAFTA nod for his troubles.

CHRIS HEWITT

In the pink

John Waters on PINK FLAMINGOS' slow climb from cult controversy to classic status

MADE FOR JUST $10,000 in 1972, John Waters' cult classic *Pink Flamingos* sees the diva Divine battle a sociopathic couple (Mink Stole, David Lochary) for the title of filthiest person alive, a provocative premise throwing up incest, cannibalism, castration, simulated chicken sex, a singing anus, cop-killing, artificial insemination and dismemberment, all ending on cinema's most famous dog-poo-eating scene. "It was something that you look back on making and think, 'How did we ever get through it?'" begins Waters. "We would shoot all day and the film would come out black. How did we ever make that movie? I didn't have a clue."

The finished film started its life reviled as obscene, but this month takes pride of place in the Criterion Collection. Here, Waters charts how it degenerated into respectability.

THE PREMIERE

Waters' previous films *Mondo Trasho* and *Multiple Maniacs* initially debuted in churches. *Pink Flamingos* opened on the campus of the University Of Baltimore.

"The opening was in a college auditorium that I rented under the auspices of the Baltimore Film Festival so the censors didn't hassle us. I wore the most ridiculous leopard shirt that Divine had made for me, which had fringe on it. Even today fringe is the ultimate fashion casualty. All the shows were sold out. People were just stunned by it. I knew it could be a hit, but how could we get it to New York?"

THE DISTRIBUTION

***Pink Flamingos* got to New York via edgy upstart distributor New Line (later of *Lord Of The Rings* fame), who Waters had identified as sharing a similar interest in combining art with exploitation. Initially, though, the company botched it.**

"New Line tried to open it at a porn theatre in Boston, which made me crazy because, to this day, no-one's jerking off watching *Pink Flamingos*. My life changed when I finally got [famed NYC midnight movie theatre] The Elgin, which I knew was the only place it would work. In the first week there was a picture of the marquee and it said "*Pink Flamingo*". They didn't even have the title right. The first week we played to maybe 50, 70 people. I went to the theatre the following week and the line was all the way around the block. It was unbelievable. When New Line was sold to Warner Bros. in the mid '90s, Warner Bros. distributed *Pink Flamingos*. Who could ever have imagined that?"

THE REVIEWS

It was a good job that Waters' film had phenomenal word-of-mouth because it got vilified by the mainstream critics, who had never seen anything like it.

"All the reviews were extreme. *Variety* said, 'One of the most vile, stupid and repulsive films ever made.' That was the main quote on

Clockwise from here: Lady in red: Divine; Trailer trash, literally; Danny Mills with the film's star; Dishing out some Divine retribution; The movie is now considered "culturally significant".

Above: On the set of *Pink Flamingos* (clockwise from left): Divine, Mary Vivian Pearce, Mink Stole, Danny Mills, John Waters, David Lochary and Edith Massey.

our ad campaign. The other great one was, 'Like a septic-tank explosion, it has to be seen to be believed' (*Detroit Free Press*). We built the entire campaign on all-negative reviews. Fran Lebowitz, writing for *Interview* magazine, said something about it being the sickest movie ever made and one of the funniest. She was the only person to give us a good review."

THE OBSCENITY CHARGES

When it opened wider, Waters and New Line were charged for obscenity. Rather than lay out for expensive lawyer fees, Waters would often just pay the $5,000 fine.

"It got busted for obscenity charges in Long Island and in Hicksville, New York. Every time we got busted, we would say, 'The Museum Of Modern Art bought a print' — but the jury was not impressed, they didn't care. As I've said before, at midnight, it's joyous and fun, a film celebration, but if you check in for jury duty at 8am in a courthouse and you sit there with strangers and watch *Pink Flamingos*, it is obscene. A hundred per cent it is."

THE TURNAROUND

But, over the years, the perception of *Pink Flamingos* and Waters altered. From 1981's *Polyester* onwards, he has inched closer to mainstream acceptance via films such as *Hairspray*, *Cry-Baby*, *Serial Mom* and *Cecil B. Demented*. These days he occupies a unique niche spot as America's favourite weird uncle.

"I haven't changed. *Pink Flamingos* hasn't changed. But everybody else must have. I feel a little bit responsible for that shift. I always said that my humour is now American humour. The kind that used to be called sick humour is now just American humour. So I think in a way I've changed less than society has."

THE VINDICATION

Two separate tributes have anointed *Pink Flamingos* as an all-time great. Last year, it was added to the prestigious National Film Registry by the Library Of Congress as being "culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant", alongside *Gone With The Wind* and *Casablanca*. And now, it has been inducted into the Criterion Collection.

"It's really exciting, without irony. Criterion have restored it so, unfortunately, you can see the chicken-fuck scene better. I've never met a person that was damaged by *Pink Flamingos*. Everyone said it made them feel better about themselves. I don't know what you'd have to do now to have the same impact. That's youth's responsibility to think that up, something that could startle, horrify and make me laugh. That's the challenge I put out to *Empire* readers." **IAN FREER**

***PINK FLAMINGOS* IS OUT ON 25 JULY ON CRITERION COLLECTION BLU-RAY**

Pink Flamingos photographs by Lawrence Irvine. Courtesy and copyright Criterion Collection and Warner Bros. Home Entertainment. All rights reserved.

MARK KERMODE'S MOVIE PLAYLIST

THE CRITIC AND SCALA RADIO PRESENTER CHOOSES SCORES HE'S BEEN PLAYING ON HIS WEEKLY SHOW

1. THE DROVER'S WIFE: THE LEGEND OF MOLLY JOHNSON

Writer/director/star Leah Purcell takes a well-known Australian tale and twists it to her own radical ends in this subversive Outback Western. Along with Mark Wareham's eye-catching cinematography, the film is lent emotional/locational oomph by a terrific score from Salliana Seven Campbell which lifts the movie to a higher plain, transcending its low-budget limitations. Hailing from a folk background, composer and multi-instrumentalist Campbell makes her feature debut with this arresting work, which marks her as a film composer to watch. Expect great things in the future.

2. THE QUIET GIRL

This brilliantly low-key feature debut from Colm Bairéad is one of the real treats of 2022 — a humanist gem that has something of the magic of Céline Sciamma's *Petite Maman*. It also has breathtakingly beautiful music by Stephen Rennicks, who sent us a couple of unmixed cues to preview on Scala in advance of a full soundtrack release. Rennicks' impressive CV includes gems like *Frank* and *Room*, but this is one of his most affecting scores, perfectly capturing the lyrical coming-of-age motifs of the movie.

3. BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

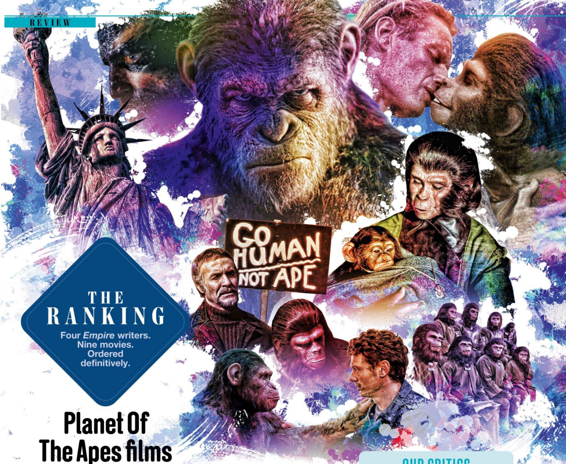
If you go looking for the score for this Juliette Binoche starrer under its English-language title, you won't get very far. But tracks from Mathieu Lamboley's 'Ouistreham (Bande originale du film)' have been going down a storm on Scala, rich in minimalist musical cycles that recall the hypnotic ambience of Philip Glass. The title track and the haunting 'Vague à l'âme' have both proved popular with our listeners, but it's worth checking out the whole five-track album.

4. THE SEED

This rubbery Shudder shocker answers the urgent question of what films like *Eraserhead*, *Society* and *Xtro* would look like if they had more swimsuits. The score, however, is genuinely entertaining, composed by Colombian musician Lucrecia Dalt, who lives in Berlin, has a background in geotechnical engineering, draws influences from Colombian mythology and German New Wave cinema, and is on a mission to explore "contemporary frontiers of avant-garde and electronic music, channelling age-old questions in a distinct and transgressive musical language". And if anybody ever wrote a CV specifically designed to catch my attention, then that was it!

scala RADIO

MARK KERMODE'S FILM MUSIC SHOW, IN ASSOCIATION WITH *EMPIRE*, IS ON SCALA RADIO ON SATURDAYS FROM 1-3PM (SCALARADIO.CO.UK)



THE RANKING

Four *Empire* writers.
Nine movies.
Ordered
definitively.

Planet Of The Apes films

Chris: I think we all grew up with *Planet Of The Apes*. In a way, we all knew the ending, even if you hadn't necessarily seen the movie.

Sam: I think this is one of those films that *The Simpsons* has either ruined or enhanced. I knew the twist because I'd seen *The Simpsons*.

Dan: Without a doubt it is, I would argue, the greatest movie ending of all time.

Chris: It's so influential. The ending of my favourite movie, *Evil Dead II*, could not be more *Planet Of The Apes* if it tried.

Sam: On rewatching, I was reminded of how good the first one is. It's ahead of its time as a complex sci-fi film. It's jarring, unnerving… The script is wonderful. If you can accept the effects, you're engaging with the film within ten minutes.

Matt: I appreciate the pace of the first one. It's 32 minutes in before an ape even shows up. It's great to see the astronauts land on the planet and roam about. There's this real tension.

Dan: I think Charlton Heston is great. He's so cynical, he has no faith in humanity at all. That feeds into the messages within the film and the political undercurrents. Martin Luther King Jr was assassinated just days before the premiere, you had Vietnam and anti-war protests kicking off, and a very divided America.

Chris: These films reflect the times in which they're made. The first five movies span 1968 to 1973, they tackle gun control, racism, religious fanaticism, intolerance, fascism, and the nuclear age is a huge thing.

Matt: And telekinetic mutants.

Chris: I was expecting the other four [from this period] to be genuinely terrible films but they're not. *Beneath* is the least successful of the immediate sequels because it almost forgets to be a *Planet Of The Apes* movie.

Sam: There are so many ideas going on. It just reminds me of a comic strip. A lot of these '70s films do. I think it's the least well-made film in the series, but it has a memorable ending.

Matt: Even though they stay thematically dark, it feels like they start to pull it back after this one.

Chris: I don't know about that. *Escape* kills its leads in horrific fashion. The villain, Dr Hasslein, shoots a little chimpanzee baby at point-blank range!

OUR CRITICS

MATT BROTHERS
Binged the first five movies recently, ill with a fever. Now more ape than man.

SAM CLEMENTS
He loves every ape he sees, from chimpan-A to chimpan-Z.

CHRIS HEWITT
Such a fan that he lives near Charlton and once went to Heston Services.

DAN JOLIN
An *Apes* geek who's even read Pierre Boulle's *La Planète Des Singes*.

Illustration: Jacey

Dan: He was just protecting the future of humanity, Chris.

Chris: But *Escape* might be my favourite of the original movies. It does these weird tonal shifts, where it's a knockabout comedy about these apes being integrated into society, and then suddenly it's not. And when it's not, it's fucking depressing.

Matt: It's like they were making a different film and then went, "How did the last one end? Oh yeah, do that again. Gun them down and cut to the credits."

Sam: This was the film I watched the most as a kid. I think it's quite fun as a set-up.

Dan: *Conquest* is the strongest of the sequels. It's actually a really interesting film. Roddy McDowall is front and centre as a new character, Caesar, who becomes this revolutionary. *Rise* is effectively a remake of this film.

Matt: *Conquest* is insanely angry. There's a lot of powerful images — everything's burning by the end, and Caesar's watching everything happen. I think one of the benefits of these ape suits and the make-up is that it really does accentuate the eyes of the actors.

Dan: I'm not a fan of *Battle*. The characters aren't really there. Caesar's not as interesting as he was in *Conquest*.

Chris: Let's leave the '70s behind, shall we? We've gone forward in time, and we land in the year 2001.

Dan: I don't like it here. It's a very silly place.

Chris: It's not a great film, Tim Burton's *Planet Of The Apes*, but I don't quite see why it's had all this opprobrium heaped upon it.

Dan: It's a shit film with amazing make-up. Rick Baker's finest work, I would say.

Matt: It was one of the first films that coined the word "reimagining".

Chris: What's really striking about it is the lack of imagination. It doesn't feel like a Tim Burton movie.

Dan: It's a pointless film, ultimately.

Chris: The interesting thing is it did well at the box office, but everyone involved did the decent thing and said, "No, we're gonna leave it for a few more years before we reboot this franchise with the remake trilogy." Which begins with Rupert Wyatt's *Rise*, which is my least favourite. I feel it's a little bit ponderous.

Dan: I love it. The humans are a little 'sat by the wayside'. But I love the arc of Caesar in that film. It's such a great story, taking him from birth to being the revolutionary leader. I love Andy Serkis' Gollum, but his greatest role is Caesar.

Matt: I think this is where CG has peaked, to be honest. When I look at Maurice I'm like, "This is a real orangutan." And it still gets to pay homage to moments of the past, with "no" being Caesar's first word.

Sam: I don't like this one very much at all. Too much human stuff, and the humans are all crap. Tom Felton delivers one of the worst performances ever to have been committed to film.

Chris: I don't get on as well with this as I do the two movies that followed. I don't know if that means Matt Reeves is a better director than Rupert Wyatt, but you can draw your own conclusions.

Matt: I think *Dawn* and *War* elevate this a bit. But it's the weakest of the three.

Chris: *Dawn* definitely feels like a step up.

Dan: Koba in that movie is like the Joker of apes. He's chilling. It's an amazing performance by Toby Kebbell, and amazing work by Weta Digital.

Sam: That dynamic between Kebbell and Serkis is what improves the series for me. A bit of ape drama. I didn't like *Rise*, too many humans. In *Dawn*, loads of apes! I'm happy!

Matt: *Dawn* is a perfect middle chapter. It builds on what's come before, and it ends in a way that is setting up the big finale.

Chris: Might *War* be considered the best *Planet Of The Apes* film?

Sam: I would consider it to be, which is no mean feat. This is the ninth film in the franchise.

Chris: What was the ninth *Carry On*?

Sam: It's hard to land a number nine. I adore this film. It builds on all the promise of the chaos of *Dawn* and delivers this really moving motion-capture performance.

Matt: It's the epic conclusion in all senses of the word. I think I slightly prefer *Dawn*. Maybe that's my love for Koba shining through as a character.

Dan: *Dawn* just edges it for me.

Matt: It starts as a war movie and becomes a prison-camp breakout film. We've mentioned that this series likes to go dark. It's a bleak-as-hell film.

Chris: Are they too bleak?

Dan: There are moments of levity. I would say *Dawn* is arguably even darker than *War*.

Chris: Well, as Mark Wahlberg says in Tim Burton's *Planet Of The Apes*, "Never send a monkey to do a man's job." So, enough squabbling, let's vote!

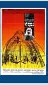
THE TOP NINE

=1

WAR FOR THE PLANET OF THE APES (2017)

Sam: "Matt Reeves directs this finale with gusto, weaving in elements from classic war movies and an iconic performance from Andy Serkis."

=1



PLANET OF THE APES (1968)

Dan: "The alpha *Apes* movie, where it all began. The make-up and worldbuilding are still remarkable, the social undercurrents still relevant, and that ending still packs a punch."

3

DAWN OF THE PLANET OF THE APES (2014)

Matt: "A strong middle chapter that fully commits to a Caesar-led story."

4

ESCAPE FROM THE PLANET OF THE APES (1971)

Sam: "Starts as knockabout comedy but ends as hard-edged social satire."

5

CONQUEST OF THE PLANET OF THE APES (1972)

Chris: "Solid stuff, with Roddy McDowall great as the flinty Caesar."

6

RISE OF THE PLANET OF THE APES (2011)

Dan: "A VFX breakthrough and a smart way to reboot the franchise."

7

BATTLE FOR THE PLANET OF THE APES (1973)

Chris: "J. Lee Thompson directs this tale of ape civil war with aplomb."

8

BENEATH THE PLANET OF THE APES (1970)

Dan: "A hokey retread of the first film. Somehow didn't kill the franchise."

9

PLANET OF THE APES (2001)

Matt: "This much maligned 'reimagining' is total tosh. A bold swing and a huge miss."

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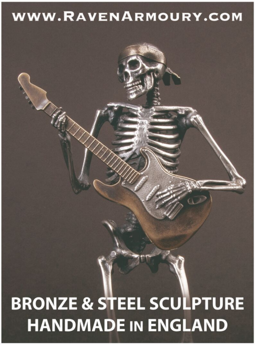
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THE CULT OF KIM NEWMAN

The critic and novelist selects the month's weirdest home-ent releases

TIM KIRKBY'S Last Looks, a shaggy-dog Los Angeles private-eye movie, skates close to thin ice by casting Mel Gibson as a "blackout drunk" British theatrical actor arrested for killing his wife during a booze binge. Bicycling ex-cop Waldo (Charlie Hunnam), who has downsized his life but upsized his beard, investigates. Suspects and subplots abound — Waldo's wife Lorena (Morena Baccarin) is missing presumed murdered, Beverly Hills kindergarten teacher Jayne (Lucy Fry from *Night Teeth*) dates a lot of rich and famous dads, and a crooked cop (Clancy Brown) wants Waldo off the case. The storyline meanders but it's full of character – Hunnam is a series-worthy slob sleuth, and Gibson (reusing his Hamlet accent) is a comic trainwreck who turns serious for affecting moments.

Dan Mirvish's 18½ is an exercise in speculative paranoia set against the Watergate scandal. Junior functionary Connie (Willa Fitzgerald) tries to share the famously missing 18-and-a-half minutes of White House tape with reporter Paul (John Magaro). In farcical fashion, they are thwarted by a broken-down reel-to-reel player and have to pose as newlyweds to charm an eccentric couple (Vondie Curtis-Hall, Catherine Curtin) in the next motel cabin into lending them the machine they use to fill the evening with bossa-nova tunes. Fitzgerald — of the *Scream* TV series and *Reacher* — delivers a focused performance while everyone else cracks up. Bruce Campbell, Ted Raimi and Jon Cryer are heard on the tape as White House conspirators.

Considering that the pitch is '*The Exorcist* in a Mexican women's prison', Alejandro Hidalgo's The Exorcism Of God is surprisingly inventive. In a reverse of the usual cast-out-Satan business, a demon possessing a woman (María Gabriela de Faría) orchestrates a ritual designed to expel the spirit of God from a priest (Will Beinbrink). Not as tightly plotted as Hidalgo's excellent *The House At The End of Time*, but it commits to scurrilous theology. Lapsed Catholics will have kittens at the appearance of Zombie Demon Jesus and Zombie Demon Virgin Mary.

Another horror film warning against suspiciously affordable accommodation, Isaac Walsh's Incarnation has Taye Diggs and Jessica Uberuaga as a couple who move into an impressive if run-down Los Angeles hilltop pile. Among omens they ignore: the landlord is Michael Madsen in a cowboy hat, pentagrams are scratched in floorboards, birds batter themselves to death on the windows. Perhaps appropriately for a film with Mammon — demon god of money — as villain, this was obviously made on the cheap. Nothing very scary or unexpected happens beyond Madsen rasping sinister dialogue and Diggs looking worried at 'suspicious activity on your account' texts.

Also cheap is Scare Us, which coincidentally features another suicidal blackbird, but this multiple-director, multi-story piece stretches its budget to be interestingly unsettling. In defiance of a curfew in a town where a masked killer is at large, a writers' group gets together in a cosy bookshop to read horror stories. Mostly, the episodes are anecdotes fleshed out with weird, irrational moments. The overall mood is unease, with just-plain-odd material (people standing still and staring offscreen) rather than cheap jumps. The standout is 'Untethered', in which a cop's son reacts as his family become dissociated from reality (and gravity) and bloody, sheeted corpses sit around the dining table. The wraparound, returning to the story of the 'Cutthroat Killer', makes the cosy bookshop a lot less cosy.

CULT HERO OF THE MONTH
BRANDON CHRISTENSEN

Writer-director Brandon Christensen has a distinctive line in deceptively low-key domestic-horror movies. *Still/Born* is about post-natal depression, as new mum Mary (Christie Burke) is haunted by the baby she lost and comes to believe its spirit has targeted a surviving twin. *Z* is another mother-and-child horror as Beth (Keegan Connor Tracy) worries that her son has inherited her evil childhood imaginary friend. *Superhost*, Christensen's latest, is a contribution to relatively new sub-genre 'Airbnb horror', and another entry in the give-influencers-a-bad-time cycle. Peppy, brittle vloggers Claire (Sara Canning) and Teddy (Osric Chau) settle in for a stay in an idyllic remote home. Superhost Rebecca — Gracie Gillam, in an extraordinary smile-and-eyes performance — is such a character the guests can't resist filming her clownishness for extra likes and subscriptions, but her fervour swiftly turns into violent frenzy.

Illustration: Neil Edwards

The Brody Bunch

Oscar-winning actor — and now writer — ADRIEN BRODY on the standout roles of his career

ILLUSTRATION **RUSSELL MOORCROFT**

IF HE WERE not so frequently brilliant, you might call Adrien Brody's career chaotic. He's made Oscar-winning dramas, epic war movies, schlocky action, and really dumb comedy. The chaos, he believes, is kind of the point. "The whole beauty of being an actor is to inhabit different lives," he says. As he makes his first foray into screenwriting, with his latest movie *Clean*, Brody talks us through his eclectic career.

LESTER
KING OF THE HILL (1993)

In his first major role, Brody played a heart-of-gold hustler in Steven Soderbergh's underappreciated early work, about a boy living alone in a hotel.

"My assumption was that all my movie-making experiences moving forward would be like that film. And they weren't. Here we had a real auteur filmmaker who had a wonderful creative vision and skill set and kindness. I met all sorts of interesting people at that time, including one of my closest friends I ever had [Patrick Oldani, who sadly died in 2020]. He was my stand-in and became a major part of my life. He was such a big ally in making *Clean*."

CORPORAL FIFE
THE THIN RED LINE (1998)

During filming of Terrence Malick's war epic, Brody thought he was the lead. It was only later he discovered his role had been cut to just a few scenes.

"Doing 22 weeks in the jungle, to do all this work, and have it disappear into a void… I cannot describe the feeling. But it gave me a lot. I made a lot of friends; I learned a great deal. I learned to come to terms with the loss and I attribute that to a lot of personal growth in other ways. It helped me when it came to interpreting other roles, like *The Pianist*… I don't believe I would have got [many of his future roles] had I not done *The Thin Red Line* and done all this great work and grown as an actor, even if we didn't see it."

RICHIE
SUMMER OF SAM (1999)

For his minor classic about an Italian-American community living in the shadow of a serial killer, Spike Lee cast Brody as oddball Richie, a slacker obsessed with British punk.

"I went to Samuel French Bookshop and bought a cassette of British standard dialect. I would put on my headphones and ride around New York on my mountain bike listening to this tape. The luxury was that the character had never been to the UK, so the accent didn't have to sound authentic. Punk culture was so foreign to me. I was a die-hard hip-hop fan."

WLADYSLAW SZPILMAN
THE PIANIST (2002)

Brody won an Oscar for playing a Jewish musician who battles to survive through World War II. It took him a long time to move on from the role.

"I had somewhat of an eating disorder [after the film] because I had done the starvation diet [to portray Szpilman]. I was eating incessantly. I wasn't really hungry; it was just the body and mind craving food. Beyond that, I had to tap into [it] and understand — even though the film is really about the survival of the human spirit and what we can endure, there's tremendous loss and suffering. To really connect to that and understand it is very hard. It's very, very depressing. I don't think that's something you ever really shake."

JACK DRISCOLL
KING KONG (2005)

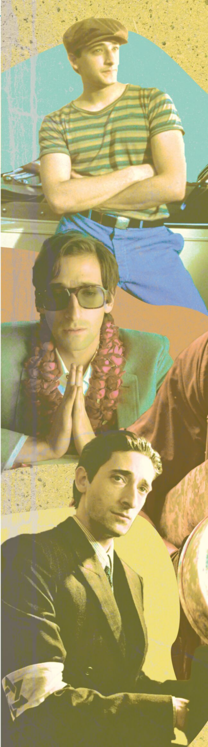
For his first blockbuster, Brody played adventuring screenwriter Jack. It was his first time working with big special effects.

"It felt like an independent movie. Peter [Jackson, director] had this autonomy. It was wonderful. We were a little troupe on an island… I'm not full-on Method but I do struggle with trying to interpret something without the proper immersion. There's a scene in the extended cut where my character sinks underwater and a leviathan appears. I'm on the base of the ocean, holding my breath and 'swimming'. We did it all in a dry studio… You're on a rope, swinging around with 35 crew members watching. It's very hard to feel 'in the moment'! You have to learn a new set of skills."

PETER
THE DARJEELING LIMITED (2008)

Brody has worked with Wes Anderson four times. The Darjeeling Limited, *in which he played one of three bickering brothers searching for their mother, was his first.*

"Wes is open and kind and thoughtful and has great friends and great taste. We hit it off straightaway. And having Owen Wilson and Jason Schwartzman as my brothers… We were in India, this wonderfully exotic place, on a moving train every day. We lived in the same house. I bought a motorcycle. It was an amazing life experience. All



Alamy, Shutterstock

Clockwise from bottom left: *The Pianist*; *The Darjeeling Unlimited*; *King Of The Hill*; *Clean*; *King Kong*; *The Thin Red Line*; *Summer Of Sam*. **Centre:** *Predators*.

of that's rare. I'm so glad Wes has called me back many times."

ROYCE

PREDATORS (2010)

In a curious addition to his CV, Brody plays a beefy action hero in an enjoyably silly Predator *sequel.*

"This is the kind of movie I watched with my friends as a kid... The roles I'd played wouldn't line me up to play a Schwarzenegger-esque character. An offer was presented [for another role in the film], which I declined. Instead of just declining, I wrote a note to Robert Rodriguez, the film's producer, and expressed my love of the genre. I said I identified more with Royce and would rather portray him. He completely agreed. It was really exciting to do that physical transformation."

CLEAN

CLEAN (2022)

As well as playing the lead, Brody is co-writer, producer and composer of Clean*. He plays Clean, a garbage man who's trying to live quietly but is forced back into his previous life of grubby crime.*

"I've enjoyed this genre since I was a young man; a genre that encompasses everything from *Taxi Driver* to Charles Bronson films — a well-earned revenge film that has a bit of bite to it. They're very satisfying films structurally. Those roles weren't really being presented to me in a shape and fashion I aspired to have. I felt compelled to [write it] because it wasn't being done." **OLLY RICHARDS**

CLEAN IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY AND DIGITAL

THE STORY OF THE SHOT

How iconic images came to life

Throne Of Blood

THRONE OF BLOOD doesn't acknowledge its source material, *Macbeth*, in its credits. This has nothing to do with 'Scottish Play' superstition. Instead, it's reflective of how Akira Kurosawa's 1957 masterpiece uses William Shakespeare's work as a mere jumping-off point for its own stunning vision. Nowhere is this more evident than in the film's finale, when beleaguered warlord Taketoki Washizu (Toshiro Mifune) is attacked by his own troops for killing their previous master (Takamaru Sasaki), arrows raining down on him as he struts along a watchtower.

Mifune dreaded shooting the scene. "He said he had recurring dreams about the 21 arrows shooting towards him," recalled set decorator and prop master Koichi Hamamura. "So, every morning he'd ask me, 'Are we doing it today?' And when I said, 'Yeah, it seems so,' he unleashed a growl." Hamamura affixed the arrowheads with short, fat needles, akin to the type used for antique phonographs. "I showed the arrows to Mifune and explained how they'd be used," said Hamamura. "And when nobody was around, Mifune and I did a practice run. He said, 'Oh, I can work with this.'"

The scene, number 100 in the script, was shot at Toho studios in the second half of 1956. Kurosawa's regular cinematographer, Asakazu Nakai, employed a telephoto lens to capture the action and, even though the character was decked out in armour, Mifune wore protective boards underneath for a further layer of protection.

"They were shooting real arrows at him," remembered assistant director Michio Yamamoto. "He'd run a few steps, and they'd shoot more arrows at him. Even with the armour he was wearing, it really stung. They'd fire off the arrows, which were hollowed out and ran along a piece of wire to ensure they hit the target, and it was my job to cut the wire as soon as they were fired. I was scared during that." Mifune's own memory of the scene is tinged with blind terror. "That's real fear in my eyes!" Mifune told a rapt New York audience in 1984. "I'm not really acting at all. And until I stopped him, Kurosawa wanted to use a bunch of amateur archers, just extras, to shoot the arrows!"

Hamamura was first on the scene after the scene was shot. "Mifune asked, 'Are we done today?' I replied, 'Today? Yes.' Then he asked, 'And tomorrow?' I said, 'Mr Kurosawa was saying we don't do it tomorrow.' He said, 'Good! Let's drink tonight!' When I returned to the prop room, he came in with bottles of beer and we had a rowdy night of drinking." You can almost feel the hangover.

IAN FREER

THRONE OF BLOOD IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY AND DIGITAL

INSTANT TRIVIA

1

US critic Bosley Crowther wrote, "The final scene in which the hero is shot so full of arrows that he looks like a porcupine is a pictorial extravagance that provides a conclusive howl." Noted.

2

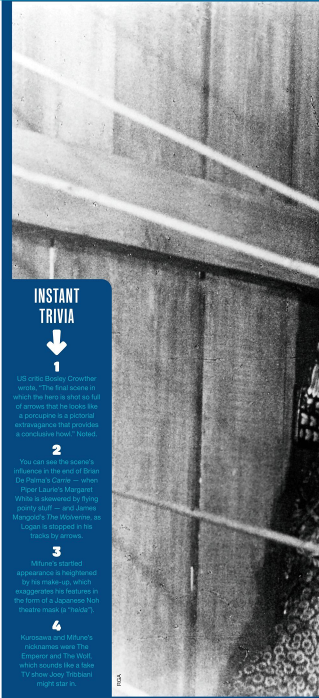
You can see the scene's influence in the end of Brian De Palma's *Carrie* — when Piper Laurie's Margaret White is skewered by flying pointy stuff — and James Mangold's *The Wolverine*, as Logan is stopped in his tracks by arrows.

3

Mifune's startled appearance is heightened by his make-up, which exaggerates his features in the form of a Japanese Noh theatre mask (a *"heida"*).

4

Kurosawa and Mifune's nicknames were The Emperor and The Wolf, which sounds like a fake TV show Joey Tribbiani might star in.



RGA

Real fear etches the face of Toshiro Mifune, as 21 arrows hurtle towards him.

6 OF THE BEST

Team *Empire* on the month's essential movies

PICK OF THE MONTH

THE OUTFIT

OUT **1 AUGUST** / CERT **15** / **106 MINS**

DVD BR ⬇ 4K

Incredibly, *The Outfit* marks the first project for Graham Moore since he won a Best Adapted Screenplay Oscar for *The Imitation Game* back in 2014. It's perhaps no coincidence that this excellent thriller, which marks Moore's directorial debut, is about the benefits of fastidiousness and patience. Mark Rylance is an English tailor who has relocated to post-war Chicago and found himself running a shop that one night doubles as a place for wounded gangster Dylan O'Brien to hide from the cops. Beautifully written and performed, it only threatens to go off the rails with a bizarre showdown that feels from another movie. Otherwise, it's as meticulously assembled as one of Rylance's suits. **CHRIS HEWITT**

DOG SOLDIERS

OUT **25 JULY** / CERT **15** / **105 MINS**

BR 4K

'Squaddies versus werewolves' is an unashamedly primal concept and it's hard to overstate how refreshing *Dog Soldiers* felt when unleashed in 2002. Made with banzai energy, it owes more to US indie horror than British tradition, though its sense of humour is inherently, well, Geordie (it's telling, perhaps, that the only RP accent belongs to Liam Cunningham's special-ops arsehole). Kevin McKidd has a growly, buff decency that in another age would have made him a movie star, while, as the swearily compassionate sergeant, Sean Pertwee is magnificent. The intervening decades only highlight how tricky it is to make something this funny and ferocious, so for his debut Neil Marshall deserves our eternal, bloody respect. **NEV PIERCE**

BENEDETTA

OUT **1 AUGUST** / CERT **18** / **131 MINS**

DVD BR ⬇ 4K

Paul Verhoeven and lesbian nuns: the perfect pairing. The master of scandal and satire returns with a crude, camp take on Catholicism, which sees the devout Benedetta (Virginie Efira) start to experience 'stigmata' — wounds and visions which correspond to those of Jesus Christ. This earns her celebrity around the convent, just as she begins a forbidden affair with new arrival Bartolomea (Daphne Patakia). Charlotte Rampling excels as the world-weary Abbess ("No miracle occurs in bed"), but Verhoeven is the real star — shocking, sensual and downright hilarious, *Benedetta* shows the director at his peak, combining blasphemic erotica with overblown theatrics and lush period visuals. **SOPHIE BUTCHER**

BILLION DOLLAR BRAIN

OUT **25 JULY** / CERT **PG** / **108 MINS**

DVD BR

Yes, *The Ipcress File* is a classic and Michael Caine's bespectacled, working-class Harry Palmer is the great anti-Bond of the 1960s spy craze… but there's a strong case to be made that the third Harry Palmer film is the pick of the series, getting away from the drab civil-service view of espionage into something more Bondian that 40 years on looks horribly like the way the real world turned out. Directed by Ken Russell, in one of those rare for-hire gigs he graced with his full-on mad genius, it has Caine's Harry sent to snowy Finland, where ultra-patriotic proto-Trump American lunatic General Midwinter (Ed Begley) is planning to launch an invasion of Latvia across thin ice floes. **KIM NEWMAN**

THE UNBEARABLE WEIGHT OF MASSIVE TALENT

OUT **11 JULY** / CERT **15** / **107 MINS**

DVD BR ⬇ 4K

A madcap, marvellously 'meta' action caper, Tom Gormican's *The Unbearable Weight Of Massive Talent* sees Nicolas Cage play a fictionalised version of himself (more paranoid, less successful) who accepts a million dollars to attend the birthday party of a millionaire superfan (a delightfully loose Pedro Pascal). Only in so doing, he finds himself caught up in a CIA operation and hunted by a drug cartel. It takes a lot of shoe leather to put Cage and Pascal together, and the set-pieces are as hit-and-miss as Cage's career, but when it's firing on all cylinders, especially in the second half, it positively crackles with old-school 'buddy-movie' energy. **DAVID HUGHES**

TRUE THINGS

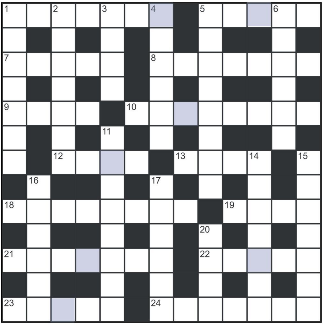
OUT **NOW** / CERT **15** / **102 MINS**

DVD BR ⬇

Love can be a dizzying, all-consuming thing — and it certainly is in Harry Wootliff's heady character study *True Things*, finding Ruth Wilson at her most magnetic as benefits worker Kate, who has her world turned upside down by a man we only know as Blond. He's played by Tom Burke, an always mercurial presence whose character takes this adaptation of Deborah Kay Davies' novel somewhere darker. We follow Kate and Blond in the seaside town of Ramsgate as she falls harder for him while he slips through her fingers like sea water. It's a tour-de-force for both actors, a cautionary tale about whirlwind romance — you'll leave this one feeling inspired to tread carefully around your next fling. **ELLA KEMP**

Alamy

CROSSWORD AND COMPETITION



ACROSS

- 1 It might be 'Fast' Eddie Felson (7)
- 5 When David Cronenberg and Paul Haggis collide (5)
- 7 *Black —*, aka 1 Down's friend Natasha Romanoff (5)
- 8 The world's oldest film production company (7)
- 9 Bremner, who was Spud in *Trainspotting* (4)
- 10 *— People* (Robert Redford in his director cap) (8)
- 12 *Blue Velvet* and *Quantum Leap*'s Stockwell (4)
- 13 *Dallas Buyers —* (Matthew McConaughey) (4)
- 18 Its main characters were Chuck Noland and Wilson (4,4)
- 19 She's the heiress to the throne of Arendelle (4)
- 21 Jane, who directed *The Power Of The Dog* (7)
- 22 Surname of Damien in the *Omen* trilogy (5)
- 23 First he was the Barbarian, then the Destroyer (5)
- 24 Ted, who's been nervous lots of times (7)

DOWN

- 1 Clint Barton's superhero alias (7)
- 2 He was the 'visual futurist' on *Blade Runner* (3,4)
- 3 Alice, who was expecting to act in *Prevenge* (4)
- 4 Could be Mimi, could be Vadim and Moore combined (6)
- 5 *The —* (Daniel Day-Lewis, Winona Ryder film) (8)
- 6/14 This year, she's in both *The Lost City* and *Bullet Train* (6,7)
- 11 National Lampoon's film series about the Griswold family (8)
- 14 See 6 Down
- 15 Actor who provided the voice of Carl in Pixar's *Up* (2,5)
- 16 She crawls out of the telly in the Japanese horror *Ring* (6)
- 17 Film festival that features Un Certain Regard (6)
- 20 It can be followed by *Dust*, *Man* and *Gate* in different movie titles (4)

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SOUNDS REAL
REAL FX BABY BLUE

***Jurassic World Dominion* is shaping up to be one of the biggest blockbusters of 2022 — and one of the standout new stars has to be cute (well, in dino terms) critter Beta, 'baby' of velociraptor Blue. We've no room to get into cloning here, but you too could embrace your inner Owen Grady and be the proud owner of your very own REAL FX® Baby Blue — an actual-movie-size junior raptor complete with realistic movements and sounds. Set to be the must-have gift this Christmas for dinosaur fans, they're available on pre-order at Smythstoys.com priced £99.99. But we have one to give away now, before they hit the shops. To enter, crack the crossword, solve the anagram and follow the instructions below.**

THE REAL FX® BABY BLUE CAN BE PRE-ORDERED NOW AT SMYTHSTOYS.COM

COMPETITION ENDS 1 AUGUST

HOW TO ENTER Take the letters from each coloured square and rearrange them to form the name of an actor, director or character. Visit www.empireonline.com/crossword and fill out the form, along with your answer, in the provided field. Entry is free and closes at midnight on 1 August. Winners are selected at random. See below for terms and conditions.

JULY ANSWERS ACROSS: 1 Iceman, **5** Buck, **8** Cloud, **9** Contact, **10** Poseidon, **11** Alan, **13** Sophia Loren, **17** Hoth, **18** Whiplash, **21** Favreau, **22** Sleep, **23** Fame, **24** Thirty. **DOWN: 2** Cross, **3** Midnight, **4** Nicholas Hoult, **5** Bond, **6** Charlie, **7** Sting, **8** Cape, **12** Joe Pesci, **14** Octavia, **15** Shaft, **16** Ship, **19** Agent, **20** Gere.

ANAGRAM GALADRIEL

TERMS AND CONDITIONS: One entry per person. Entries are free. Entries must be received before 2 August or will not be valid. The Competition is only open to people aged 18 and over who live in the United Kingdom and are not a Bauer employee or their immediate family. One winner will be selected at random from all valid entries. Competition promoted by H Bauer Publishing t/a Empire ("Empire"). Empire's choice of winner is final, and no correspondence will be entered into in this regard. The winner will be notified, via email, between seven and ten days after the competition ends. Empire will email the winner a maximum of three times. If the winner does not respond to the message within 14 days of the competition's end, Empire will select another winner at random and the original winner will not win a prize. Empire is not responsible for late delivery or unsatisfactory quality of the prize. Entrants agree to the collection of their personal data in accordance with Empire's privacy policy: http://www.bauerdatapromise.co.uk/. Winner's personal details will be given to prize provider to arrange delivery of the prize. Bauer reserves the right to amend or cancel these terms or any aspect of the competition (including the prize) at any time if required for reasons beyond its control. Any questions, please email empire@bauermedia.co.uk. Complaints will not be considered if made more than 30 days after the competition ends. Winner's details available on request (after the competition ends) by emailing empire@bauermedia.co.uk. For full T&Cs see http://www.bauerlegal.co.uk/competition-terms.html

CLASSIC SCENE

Standout sequences from the great movies

Mad Max 2

Chosen by ERIC BANA

ERIC BANA: "*Mad Max 1* and *2* are two of my favourite films of all time. It would have to be a beaten-down Mel Gibson, about halfway through *Mad Max 2*, when he whistles and everyone turns and he says, 'Two days ago I saw a rig big enough to haul that tanker. You want to get out of here? You talk to me.' That is the fucking coolest character moment for me. I don't know how much it's informed my work, but it's given me pleasure."

Max Rockatansky (Mel Gibson) is sitting on a pile of junk. In the distance, we hear the besieged Settlers argue about their next course of action after receiving an ultimatum from the Lord Humungus and his Marauders, but we can't make out what they're saying. The Feral Kid (Emil Minty) emerges from his shelter, holding a blood-stained metal boomerang — the one he used to kill the partner of the Marauder, Wez — in one hand. He and Max size each other up. The Feral Kid mimes throwing the boomerang, then puts it away.

Max takes out a little music box and starts turning the handle. The tune of 'Happy Birthday' is played, much to the Feral Kid's delight. After a few seconds, Max stops playing and throws the music box to the Feral Kid, who, laughing with delight, runs off.

We then pick up with the Settlers, some of whom are standing on their trucks. Others are standing in a semi-circle. All are watching Pappagallo (Mike Preston) as he holds court.

PAPPAGALLO: But remember, remember one thing. That is more than just a tanker of gas. That is our lifeline to a… to a place beyond that vermin on machines.

CURMUDGEON (Syd Heylen): That's two thousand miles from here! How do you expect us to get it there? Drag it?

PAPPAGALLO: If we have to, yes! There's always a way! But the first step… defend the fuel.

BIG REBECCA (Moira Claux): Words. Just words! You'd die for a pipe dream!

WARRIOR WOMAN (Virginia Hey): Wrong. We fight for a belief. I stay.

Some of the Settlers clearly aren't convinced. They start throwing down their weapons.

THE CAPTAIN'S GIRL (Arkie Whiteley): I wish it could have worked, Pappagallo. You can't expect to compete with that. Every day we get weaker while they get stronger. It's finished. I'm sorry.

Max, who's been listening the whole time, suddenly puts his fingers in his mouth and emits a sharp, short whistle. The Settlers turn to look at him. The camera pushes in on him as he talks.

MAX: Two days ago I saw a vehicle that'd haul that tanker. You want to get out of here…?

He motions to himself.

MAX: You talk to me.

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